

6

FORGETTING PICTURES

PHOTOGRAPHIC EXPERIENCE

After a four-hour hike down into the Grand Canyon and anticipating a longer ascent, my partner and I were standing at Plateau Point, admiring the spectacular view of the Colorado River below. Within a few minutes, a young tourist came down the trail, turned to ask us to take her photo, and immediately retraced her path without stopping to take in the breathtaking vista. Where did that image of an unobserved landscape end up? Who looks at it and why? What is the meaning of extensive digital images constantly being produced and posted online? What does this use reveal about the relationship of our society with time, experience, and representation?

In his presentation of the project *Le Supermarché des Images* (*The Supermarket of Images*¹), Peter Szendy writes that “we live in a world that is increasingly saturated with images”—there are too many, and there is not space for all of them. Back in 2011, in his installation *Photography in Abundance*, Erik Kessels stacked a room with a million photos that had been uploaded to Flickr in twenty-four hours, showing this in a tangible way.² When does the abundance of images become excessive, to the point of saturation? Compared to previous eras, how is our social space overloaded as if it “can no longer contain the images that constitute it”?³

As Susan Sontag remarked almost fifty years ago, “just about everything has been photographed.”⁴ We have since moved into an era of “ubiquitous photography”⁵—a condition in which immediate sensory experience (of being in a place and seeing something: this, here and now) is directly overlapped with an image. The spread of camera phones, however, brings in an additional dimension. The smartphone photograph not only fixes the moment in a stable and reproducible way, but typically also enters it into the fluid circuit of images on the web—through Instagram, Facebook, or even the ephemeral production of images on Snapchat, which are generated to intentionally be deleted as soon as they have been viewed.

Why do we do this? How is our experience affected by photography, and how does photographing itself become an experience? Perhaps digital photographs are taken and distributed in order to escape the pressure that our “risk society” puts on the present.⁶ At the same time the artistic world is using digital images to experiment with unprecedented forms of immersion in direct experience. Escape and immersion. No one ever said communication was simple.

IMAGES TO REMEMBER

Several studies have pointed out the shift from memorization to communication as the primary use of photography in the digital age.⁷ In our analog tradition, the production of images was first of all a form of conservation and memorization.⁸ People took pictures in order to remember the few scenes and the few experiences that were worth preserving. Aspects of the world were reproduced in an image that captured a moment in the inevitable passage of time, a moment that would otherwise be borne into oblivion and dissolution.

Yet the production of images did not record *the* world but rather a *point of view* on the world. As Panofsky observed in 1927, what the image froze and preserved was the perspective of the painter who painted it or the observer who took the picture, saving from oblivion someone’s point of view about a moment.⁹ The world was always preserved as the memory of someone, even while things changed, and time passed. And as one cannot remember everything, so the number of possible images

was limited, and selection was needed. Too many memories, even if we could preserve them, did not serve as a good memory because they would be easily confused and impossible to manage. Just as with memories, for the analog world there could be “too many” images, and a risk of producing a saturation point.¹⁰

Time passes today as well, but an abundance of images favors a different way of managing transience and presence in the digital age. What changes with a constant production of images at almost no cost and with the possibility of virtually unlimited storage? We can ostensibly reproduce everything and, in theory, keep these reproductions forever because digital images are stored in cloud services, in a virtual form that does not require physical space or much user expense. The images can also be recalled on a whim when we want to remember them. In the form of a digital image, apparently nothing is lost. If there is an excess of images in the digital world, the problem is not simply their large number.

Storage and retrieval were in fact the two big challenges that people traditionally had to cope with to not lose memories: to be able to preserve them and be able to find them in the maze of mnemonic spaces that risked becoming crowded and unmanageable.¹¹ Both are solved by digital technology, which offers practically inexhaustible storage spaces and retrieval tools that allow us to find all of what we stored without the content getting lost within an excess of memories¹²—even the memories we had not remembered. Using tags on Instagram, for example, we can find all the images we stored, and also tagged aspects that we did not notice at the time but that were marked by others.¹³ Moreover, recent machine-learning techniques have developed algorithms that can autonomously produce their own tags, to manage the past from perspectives no one has yet thought of and generate new information. Is this the reason why we photograph everything: to preserve experience and reinforce memory? To deepen our relationship with things by withdrawing them from oblivion, to be able to go back and review them later?

Observation of digital practices for producing and managing images reveals that the opposite is true. As with the tourist in the Grand Canyon, in many cases, we do not take photographs to deepen experience—we do it to withdraw from experience.¹⁴ We do not produce images to preserve the present—we produce them to escape the present. This is a basic

difference between the traditional relationship with images and the new digital mode—and is perhaps the reason for the excess of images in our web society.

THE RISK OF THE PRESENT

A digital user equipped with a smartphone often does not experience a moment, but reproduces it. Before looking at the world, they photograph it. Instead of facing the vastness and the risks of an experience, the digital user freezes it in an image and posts it on the web. We all know it: many visitors in exhibitions do not stop and look at a painting, absorbing the multiplicity of perspectives contained in the work of art, together with the specificity of the location in the room, the light, the space, the position, and the present moment—they do not expose themselves to these experiences. Instead of looking, the digital user takes photographs, and they do the same in front of a sunset, a landscape, a dish in a restaurant. As Susan Sontag already remarked, “Images are able to usurp reality.”¹⁵ Why do people do it? It would be simplistic to dismiss these practices as superficial and frivolous. Such widespread behaviors signal a deeper change of perspective and horizon, a new cultural approach that must be taken seriously.

Digital tourists are not stupid nor ignorant, yet have a different relationship with images and their management. They do not produce an image to preserve it from the course of time—they produce it to escape the present. This attitude can be traced back to the “risk society” that overloads the present with responsibility for the construction of the future.¹⁶ “Risk” in this sense is not a future condition, but a problem of the present, generated when many possibilities are available and we ask ourselves today if and how the future we will have to face depends on our current behavior. What I do (or do not do) today will have consequences, and tomorrow I will either regret these actions or reap the advantages they bring. If I speculate on the stock exchange, I can lose my money or make substantial gains, and depending on either, tomorrow I will be afflicted or happy. The problem is that now I do not know the future and I cannot know how things will turn out—I only know that the blame (or the merit) will fall on my behavior today, and that I have to decide now.

The awareness of risk as a dependence of the future on the present is now widespread in every area of our private and social lives, from our intimate relationships (it is up to us to decide whether to marry and who to marry, but we cannot know if our marriage will be a happy one); to professional choices (it is up to us to decide what to study and which career to undertake, a decision which can have a variety of positive or negative outcomes); to managing money (do we want to invest in the stock market or not?). The risk awareness places an enormous pressure on the present, which is already observed as a future past.¹⁷ This approach also burdens our experiences with uncertainty and widening anxiety—why am I here now, doing this, when I could be doing otherwise and when these choices affect my future? As O’Doherty writes: “Direct experience might kill us.”¹⁸ It would be nice to escape this anxiety and pressure, without withdrawing entirely from the world and from experience.

Instead, perhaps, we could take a photograph—indeed, we take a lot of them. The elaboration of the present is entrusted to its reproduction (it is not the task of the present) and referred to others—the others with whom the web connects us.¹⁹ Photographs become “social photos,” simply “taken to be shared.”²⁰ Producing an image, in fact, is not usually done to be stored, but to be posted. Snapchat is the exemplar of this digital use of images, of taking a picture solely to put it on the web, that is, to show it to others. This is the form of reproduction carried out in the digital world: the aim is social multiplication, not temporal preservation. The image is not produced to see it better nor to be able to review it later, but to let others see it. And after they have seen it, it can be removed from circulation, as is true of Snapchat.

Digital users do not look at things and do not directly live experiences—they curate experiences for sharing with others and to show themselves observing them, appearing to build an identity in doing so.²¹ The sense of the image becomes an “I see” shown to others—and only then can one see. Experience is produced through mediation and lived by reflection, observing one’s observation observed by others—and in this way it becomes interesting and meaningful, unburdened from the weight of the present and from individual responsibility for the construction of the future.

TIME-SPECIFIC EXPERIENCE

Is the outcome an excess of images? Not necessarily, because the web's algorithms are perfectly able to take care of them, selecting the images that become relevant and keeping the others in an indefinite virtuality that accommodates everything. The consequence, however, might be a transformation of direct experience: the immediate space of the here-and-now changes its meaning, and traditional forms no longer work in the same way—possibly supplemented by hybrid modes such as flash mobs, where the participants observe themselves observing the event.²² The management and preparation of experience are also changing in all forms of involvement that require that which has become the most anachronistic resource: the physical presence of participants in a specific place at a specific time—at concerts, conferences, theatrical performances, and (for images) a new form of art exhibits.

Faced with the excess of images reproduced and circulated online, the organizers of exhibitions have progressively modified structure and meaning in recent years. Already in the twentieth century, the experience offered by exhibitions has been less and less about contemplating a painting or work of art (which can also be reproduced with very high resolution), nor about seeing a sequence of works in chronological order (e.g., from Cimabue to Jackson Pollock), or about works organized according to abstract criteria such as thematic or stylistic affinity. Exhibitions offer rather a contextual experience, a participation in the extended present of the “white cube” of the museum or the gallery, a specific space removed from feeling pressure about time and anxiety about the future.²³ The visitor must be physically there and must perceive the moment with an otherwise unknown intensity and reflexivity. They are not asked to fix their attention on a single work of art but to participate in a broader experience generated by a contemporary exposure to different (often heterogeneous) works and by the works' mutual relationships in the exhibition space—something that cannot be reproduced in an image and cannot be posted on the web. The experience is not about getting to see the *Mona Lisa* or another work of art, but perceiving the spatial arrangement of the room, the light at that time of day, the volumes, the references and harmonies between all exhibited objects.

The contextuality of artistic experience was radicalized in the 1970s with the experimentation of space-bound exhibitions: *site-specific* works like Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*—a 1,500-foot-long, fifteen-foot-wide counterclockwise coil of mud and rocks unfolding from the shore of the Great Salt Lake in Utah²⁴—or Daniel Buren's installations integrating contemporary art into historic buildings. Art objects were linked to a specific place inside or outside the museum and could not be moved without losing their meaning. "To remove the work is to destroy it," noted Richard Serra about his *Tilted Arc*.

In a further step of contextualization, some curators are now experimenting with forms of time-bound exhibitions in which visual art (as in the theater) dictates the time of viewing by visitors, which cannot be changed without altering the meaning.²⁵ Several innovative curatorial experiments by Hans Ulrich Obrist, for example, are conceived as temporal rather than spatial experiences.²⁶ The most advanced are supposedly his *Marathons*, twenty-four-hour-long hybrid combinations of conversations, performances, presentations, and experiments. The emptying of present experience linked to the excess of images in digital society is reflected here in its opposite: a rediscovery and replanning of contextual presence in the moment of the exhibition.

Time bound as in theater is, however, it is not yet *time-specific* in the sense of a reflective awareness of temporal context. An authentic, innovative time-specific experience is instead being produced precisely in connection with the excess of digital images, and precisely using photographs. Christian Marclay's video-installation *The Clock* shows this in an exemplary way: it consists of a twenty-four hour-long montage of thousands of images of clocks in movies or on television, combined in such a way that the time shown on the screen always exactly coincides with the current moment of viewing, with the present time of the spectator.²⁷ Seeing on the screen the images of distant places and moments synchronized with the present, Marclay says, "you're constantly reminded of what time it is," so that "*The Clock* has the ability to make us present in the moment."²⁸ The viewers who observe the perspective of others reproduced by the images on the screen are led to reflect on their own perspective and their current context—reversing the tendency to digitally escape the present and their contextual experience.

The realization of these kinds of works, however, is possible only with the support of a new powerful cultural technology. It requires exploiting the exorbitant number of digital pictures available today, from which Marclay could extract the images of watches for all twenty-four hours of the installation. Contrary to the reproduction and consumption of photographs and videos on the web, in this case the excess of images is not intended to escape the present and move away from experience. On the contrary, in the artistic event, images of distant experiences are used to immerse the participants in their immediate experience with unprecedented intensity.

CONCLUSION

The abundance of images in our digital society offers both the option of escaping the present and of immersing oneself in it; more generally, it offers the possibility to explore combinations of presence and absence in dizzying and complex ways. As we already saw in the relationships between remembering and forgetting, personalization and anonymity, creativity and “massification,” in many cases the differences generated by digital technology can be understood not as oppositions, but as distinctions whose two sides exist together and bind each other²⁹—without the desire to escape the present producing an abundance of digital images, new forms of reflective awareness of the present in exhibitions would not exist either. Whereas the “ubiquity of social photographs threatens our ability to really live in the moment,” it also generates “a sensual expression of and engagement with the moment.”³⁰ The saturation of images in the digital world invokes a new relationship between memory and experience, immediacy and detachment, image and vision.

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