Psychical Distance in Photography

Hildred Scott

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PSYCHICAL DISTANCE IN PHOTOGRAPHY

by

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Master of Fine Arts Degree

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ThESIS PROPOSAL
for
The Master of Fine Arts Degree
College of Graphic Arts and Photography
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

Title: Psychical Distance in Photography

Purpose of the Thesis: To apply the concept of psychical distance in the making of photographs.

Submitted by: Hildred M. Scott

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Scope of the Thesis:

My fascination with photography has always been more with the image itself than with the particulars of technique, process, etc. I believe that we all use certain mental mechanisms in both the making and the viewing of photographs. Some of these mechanisms have to do with our desires and others with our prejudices, but most interesting to me is the concept of psychical distance.

Imagine a fog at sea. For many it would be an experience of profound unpleasantness, the potential danger producing feelings from mild anxiety to intense fear. Such an incident might also be a source of intense enjoyment provided we could abstract from the event our apprehensions and consider the situation for its peace and physical beauty. This difference in outlook is made possible by the implementation of distance, a psychical distance attained by placing the phenomenon out of gear with our practical selves and outside the context of our personal needs and ends.¹

In photography the truthfulness of an image is often given too much consideration, especially since the camera continues to demonstrate persuasively that nothing is as it seems anyway. It is important then that we consider images
apart from whatever real-life models they may have.
Subsequently, my concern is less with what my subject
actually is and more with what it might become.

It is this becoming of an image that has to do with
the use of psychical distance. In other words, we can
adopt a mental attitude which allows us to consider an
image not for its practical attributes but for the features
immediately presented. Thereby we make possible the
contemplation of the work alone.

Psychical distance does not imply a purely intellectual
or dispassionate relation with a work; indeed, just the
opposite condition exists. The experience becomes quite
personal because it has been filtered of its practical
implications. Such a situation opens up incredible
possibilities in appreciation and understanding. "The
sudden view of things from their reverse or unnoticed side
comes upon us as a revelation, and such revelations are
precisely those of art."2

Procedure:

It is my intention in this thesis to produce a body
of work using the concept of psychical distance as an
essential tool in the making of images. My major concerns
will be those of line, space, and texture in combination
with tonality and color. Content or subject matter will not
be a primary aesthetic consideration since this area is the one most closely tied to practical attitudes. Therefore, the subject matter within the prints will be as varied as is possible in order to show a wider application of the concept of psychical distance. There will be landscapes, portraits, and abstractions, as well as images which do not fall readily into such categories. The completed project is proposed for twelve (12) quarter credit hours and the final exhibition will contain approximately twenty-five to thirty finished prints, including both black and white and color images.


2Ibid. p. 398
I first encountered the concept of psychical distance several years ago in an article by Edward Bullough. Since that time it has been an important element in most of my photographic endeavors. My graduate thesis provided a unique opportunity to concentrate exclusively on this idea and hopefully gain an understanding of exactly how it operates in a variety of photographic situations.

Simply stated, psychical distance involves the consideration of an object or an image for those features immediately presented to us rather than for any practical or merely representational ends. Subject matter, or rather our concern with it, is held in abeyance while our attention is directed toward the more "objective" qualities, such as color, textural, and spatial relationships. "We may appreciate works of art as vehicles for nonaesthetic values --moral, social, religious, intellectual, and others; and the experience will be the richer for it. But if we respond directly to those values... we are not appreciating the object aesthetically as a work of art." 2

In other words, psychical distance is essentially the implementation of an attitude of disinterestedness toward the content of an image. It allows us then a more complete awareness of the object itself because we are not deflected
by a concern for its utilitarian implications. "To appreciate a work of art we need to bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas or affairs, no familiarity with its emotions... To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form and color and a knowledge of three-dimensional space."³

Throughout the meetings with my thesis board, significant questions arose. One of the first and perhaps most important criticisms was that the scope of my thesis proposal was too broad and that it dealt with what might be considered too universal a concern in photography. In response to the first point I would say that the very nature and purpose of a thesis demands that it be broad in scope. By necessity a student should be granted a healthy amount of latitude if the work is to truly represent the culmination of his graduate studies. The exploration of a limited idea would provide us with only a limited kind of understanding.

As to the second point, I remain unconvinced that psychical distance in some form is a concern of all photographers. However, if this claim to universality were true, then rather than being a poor reason, it would seem the very best of reasons for the investigation of such an idea.

In the early meetings the consensus of my board was that the images were too scattered, too divergent overall
in their relationship to each other and to the ideas contained in the proposal. Their observation was probably quite correct. Although I had done a great deal of shooting by that time, the assembling of the images was still in a formative stage. I had made no serious attempt at editing because I wanted the board to see the work-in-progress in its entirety and to become involved in the process along with me. In retrospect I regret not having done more preliminary editing. The use of dissimilar images was to become the primary controversy between me and the members of the board. Much of that disagreement might have been averted had I eliminated some of the images sooner.

As a result of this question of disparate images, my second board meeting became something of an ordeal. The problem was further compounded by my inability to convince the board of exactly what it was I was doing. My greatest error was in my method of explanation. I began by giving what I thought to be a very simple and concise definition of the utilization of psychical distance. Judging from the reaction of my audience it was neither simple nor concise. Subsequently I rethought my position, paraphrased my ideas, and made another attempt. The second was received with no more enthusiasm than the first. I tried again, until it became apparent that I was confusing rather than clarifying
the issue. Instead of reinforcing the original idea, as was my intention, I succeeded only in raising doubts in the minds of the board members as to my own understanding of the concepts involved.

As a result, the meeting ended with something of an ultimatum from the board. During the next few weeks I was to make as many images as possible which would substantiate or visually reinforce what we could agree was the central core of the work. Charles Arnold suggested also that I prepare a succinct written statement that would clarify for them and for me exactly what my understanding of psychical distance was.

During the next two weeks the pressure was intense. I was either shooting or printing every day. At the third meeting I presented approximately ten new prints which I felt strongly reinforced the preceding work and were successful within the context of the proposal. Along with these images I submitted the following written statement:

"Art is a way of experiencing the coming into being of an object; that which has already become what it is is not important for art....

The purpose of art (then) is to impart in us the sensation of an object as it is perceived and not merely recognized. To accomplish this
purpose art uses two techniques: the defamiliarization of things, and the distortion of form." (Victor Shklovsky, *Art as Technique*)

This is the best single explanation of psychical distance I have found. However, the techniques are extremely broad. There are many specific methods one might list under these general headings. Those which I am using fall into the following two categories:

1. Framing: selecting and isolating the image.

2. Setting up or redefining the tensions and relationships within the image between its constituent features, i.e. space, colors, planes, shapes and textures.

In this manner, using the subject as the raw material, I hope to transform it into an interesting provocative, and autonomous image that is distinct from what it was.

During the third meeting there was little discussion (perhaps since the previous meeting had been so lengthy and intense). Apparently the new images and the statement were
more persuasive than I had been verbally. Of the entire body of work, only three prints seemed to raise any serious overall objections. All three had been produced (or rather constructed) in the studio and dealt more obviously than the rest with the idea of abstraction. Subsequently, the objections were based on their initial dissimilarity to the majority of the other images, and it was suggested that they be deleted for the sake of coherence and consistency in the final exhibition.

Throughout the board meetings the editing had been a matter of compromise. Some prints had been eliminated based upon my feelings and some upon those of the board members. However, with this final request I felt I could not comply. The three prints in question were too important to the integrity of the work as a whole. Admittedly they were different, yet the difference had to do primarily with subject matter and general recognizability. In the context of a thesis proposal which advocated both variety and a de-emphasis of content I found it difficult to follow these objections. It was my desire in most of the work to maintain the legibility of the subject matter. However, to have chosen a few prints in which the content was more obscure does not invalidate or damage the main premise, i.e. that the importance of an image rests not upon our knowledge of
a subject but upon the way in which textures, shapes, and colors are combined upon a surface.

Objections to these last few prints seemed to stem from the board's expectations for the visualization of the process at work in the thesis. Since the work involved the transformation from object to image, from practical to relational considerations, they felt that the entire process should be visible in each print. In other words, even though the primary concerns were non-literal (space, texture, etc.) the subject matter should remain recognizable or familiar so the transition could be better understood. In my view, while it seems generally preferable to maintain the subject matter intact, it does not seem essential or ultimately necessary in each and every image.

During the past year my thesis work has undergone several transitions. Perhaps the most visible was the shift from black and white to color. Originally the project was to include only monochromatic images. While I was interested in color, I knew very little about it and expected that any enthusiasm I might have for it would be short-lived. I worked throughout the summer of 1977, shooting and formulating my ideas exclusively around black and white. Finally, in August, I began experimenting with color—more out of curiosity than any serious concern. I soon realized that
color was going to be more than a momentary infatuation for me. The reason, which at first seemed so inexplicable, was actually quite simple. Since my primary interests were those of space and texture, color offered me an incredibly persuasive new tool. Amazing relationships that I could not achieve in shades of grey were now possible. I could maintain in a print all the qualities afforded by black and white plus have color to accentuate, to define, to emphasize.

Another important discovery came from my readings. I had originally thought the idea of psychical distance to be rather novel. I had encountered it in one form or another in only a few places and often in terms so vague as to be meaningless. I found, however, upon further investigation that the predecessors were numerous. "Historically the notion of 'disinterestedness' came into prominence in opposition to the 'intelligent egoism' of Thomas Hobbes, who argued that all the precepts of morality and religion can be reduced at bottom to enlightened self interest. Against this view Lord Shaftesbury (1671-1713)...maintained that virtue and goodness must of necessity be 'disinterested'. They must be pursued for their own sake and not from motives of self-interest."4

The concept was further synthesized and introduced into the realm of aesthetics by Immanuel Kant in his Critique of Judgement (1790). In that work he concerns himself primarily
with the grounds of judgement. His contention is that aesthetic judgements differ from those we make about other kinds of pleasure in that they are not cognitive in character but rely instead on an attitude of disinterested attention. In other words, our concern is not truly an aesthetic one if we must maintain consideration of an object for its advantage, purpose, or even existence.

This attitude of disinterestedness has by no means been the exclusive domain of philosophy. There are references to it in the writings of Freud, such painters as Mondrian, Matisse, and Henri, as well as photographers like Weston, White and Caponigro. One of the most succinct references is in an essay by Aaron Siskind entitled "The Drama of Objects". "For the first time in my life," he writes, "subject matter, as such, had ceased to be of primary importance. Instead, I found myself involved in the relationships of these objects... I cautioned my co-workers on this job to become as passive as possible when they faced the subject, to de-energize for the moment their knowledge of the ideas about the subject, to let the facts fall away...to permit the subject to speak for itself and in its own way."

There are several peripheral issues implicit in the concept of psychical distance. Perhaps the most important involves the autonomy of the image. Since our concern in
an attitude of disinterested attention is with the relationships of the constituent features and not with our knowledge of an object, it follows that the image must now become the artifact. In other words, our interest should terminate in the photograph. We should not allow the image to serve as a point of reference to its subject or to our knowledge of its affairs. Unlike documentary work, for example, our purpose here is one of direct contemplation which enables us to appraise a work based only upon its suitability for aesthetic enjoyment, and allows "a class of 'fine arts' to be recognized whose value rests not on any extraneous usefulness but on 'autonomous' artistic standards".6

When considering my thesis work, it is important to remember that the concept of psychical distance involves not only the spatial, textural and tonal configuration of an image but the point of view of the photographer as well. As I emphasized in the thesis proposal, psychical distance is first and foremost an attitude, a mental posture which allows us to consider an event (in this case, a photograph) for those qualities which remain after the practical or representational considerations have been set aside. The ability to implement this attitude is, like any other mental process, variable from individual to individual. Therefore in making the photographs I had to keep in mind not only my
own attitudes but also the idea of variability, since the images were ultimately intended for an audience. In other words, I was attempting to approach my subject matter with an attitude of disinterestedness already in operation, but I had to remain constantly aware that this might not be the case with the viewer. Subsequently, it was very important that what we have called the constituent features of the image be as strong and compelling as possible in order to maximize for the viewer the de-emphasis of any concern for subject matter or representation.

Image #1 (see slides), for example, is obviously a study of a simple landscape. My intention in making the photograph was to frame it in such a way as to emphasize the spatial tensions and relationships and to eliminate any elements in the scene which were not useful to that end or which contributed to a sense of place or to a practical definition of the image. The simplicity and directness of the color were intended to contribute to the effect. The strength of the photograph then does not rest upon literal associations. The scene is merely a stimulus, a point of departure for the accentuation of and response to the formal components.

Image #30, although the subject matter is quite different, is similarly composed. The impact of the print hinges upon the textural surfaces, space and color quality contained
within the rectangle rather than with such practical questions as who, what and where.

Photographs, of course, can be appreciated on a variety of levels. The images contained in this thesis were an attempt to concentrate on one of those levels, the aesthetic. The work is a practical exercise in the separation of aesthetic from non-aesthetic values. It is an endeavor to set aside mentally and physically in the images considerations of utility, practicality, or social and cultural concerns.

Image #10 is one presentation of this idea. The flowers are Easter lilies and the background is soil. One could wax philosophical about such religious and cultural symbols; however, the point is not interpretation. The point is not to read in meaning. The point is only to read and then respond to the combinations of texture, color, etc. That other understandings are possible can not be argued. I can only say that it was my intention to produce photographs which encourage an understanding which is not dependent upon a knowledge of the real-life models from which the images came.

In the final evaluation I am satisfied with the images contained in the exhibition. I feel that by and large they were consistent with the original proposal and that they represented the ideas of psychical distance as I have
enumerated them here. I regret that there were images about which I had some degree of uncertainty but to be otherwise, to have no doubts at all, would have been a worse situation. It is important that there still be questions if one is to keep a sound perspective that will allow his work to grow. I regret also that the sharing produced such controversy and that my ideas met with as much opposition as they did. However, I do not consider the sharing to have been a wholly negative experience. In retrospect I feel that I may profit more from the opposition than I would have from unquestioning acceptance. In the future I am sure that psychical distance will play a large part in my work, but I am also relieved that I can now go back to making images without such strict adherence to a single idea. There are other things I need to understand.
FOOTNOTES TO THESIS REPORT


4 Osborne, Aesthetics and Art Theory, p. 154.


6 Osborne, Aesthetics and Art Theory, p. 159.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


