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The Melancholy of Images: Reassessing the Value of Photography

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Abstract

This essay reflects on the contemporary crisis of photography, not as a question of identity but of relevance, within a landscape oversaturated by images and dominated by smartphones and social media. It traces photography's shifting role, from vernacular practices to artistic experimentation, highlighting how democratized technologies and mass production have blurred distinctions between professional and amateur image-making. Against this backdrop, the resurgence of analogue processes, photobooks, and material experimentation underscores photography's enduring value as a medium of reflection rather than redundancy. The argument proposes that photography's future lies in its capacity to balance representation with material presence, editing rigour, and embodied experience, demanding new forms of teaching and critical practice. Photography must thus reclaim its significance through conscious, epistemological image production.

Keywords: Contemporary Photography, Self-portraiture, Appropriation, Narrative Expression, Artistic Autonomy

Biography

Since 1990, Delfim Sardo has been dedicated to curating contemporary art and writing essays on art. He is a Guest Professor at the College of Arts and the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of Coimbra. Sardo served as the General Curator of the Lisbon Architecture Triennale in 2010. Between 2003 and 2006, he was the Director of the Exhibition Centre at the Belém Cultural Centre in Lisbon. Sardo founded and directed the magazine Pangloss. From 1997 to 2003, he worked as a consultant for the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. In 1999, he was the Commissioner for the Portuguese Representation at the 48th Venice Biennale. In 2010, he co-curated the Portuguese Representation at the Venice Architecture Biennale. Until 2020, he was an Advisor for Visual Arts at Culturgest under the direction of Mark Deputter. Sardo's published works include Julião Sarmento, Catalogue Raisonné, Edições Numeradas, Vol. I (MEIAC, 2007), Jorge Molder (Caminho, Lisbon, 2005), Helena Almeida, Pés no Chão, Cabeça no Céu (Bial, 2004), Abrir a Caixa (Caixa Geral de Depósitos, 2009), and A Visão em Apneia (Babel, 2011).

Essay

One of the main questions currently facing the world of image production, particularly in photography, is its relevance—more explicitly, its raison d'être within a landscape marked by total saturation.

In a global context where the most widely used device in contemporary societies is the smartphone and where images are predominantly published on social networks—where the vertical format has been adopted to match the standardized scrolling format—photography appears to be experiencing a crisis comparable to that which painting underwent, not when photography was invented, but when image-making became commonplace with pointand-shoot cameras, such as Sony's 1964 Handycam. A seminal exhibition like The Photographer's Eye, conceived by John Szarkowski for the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1966, which juxtaposed vernacular photography with images created by Photographers (with a capital P), would have no place today because the flow of images has exhausted the possibility of judgment. Moreover, the radical democratization of devices precludes any comparative overview, and the field of authorial photography has absorbed all the paraphernalia of technical errors, indecisions, and a vernacular passion that has intensified since the 1950s, from the nomadic gaze of Robert Frank to the conceptual functionality of Ed Ruscha, Dan Graham, or Andy Warhol.

Curiously, if, in the first instance, the primacy of technology was the response found by authors—whether through the advent of digital media or the possibilities afforded by large-format prints, which imported into photography a corporeality that previously belonged to painting (or to communication, as was the case with the Russian avant-gardes from the early 1920s)—the widespread use of high-resolution portable image-capturing techniques, coupled with the capacity for image storage, has produced a contrary and unexpected effect: a nostalgic return to analogue techniques, a renewed sensitivity to the sophistication of printing (as evidenced by the resurgence of platinum printing, for instance), and a renewed importance of the photobook, often in the form of an artist's book, with all the multiplicity of possibilities that such a format can entail.

On the other hand, the disassociation of photography from the notion of an "exemplary image", mainly through the use of seriality, has introduced into the photographic universe—especially since the 1970s—a notion that the image is always a system of interdependencies, blurring the epistemological boundaries of the photographic field or subsuming it into the broader realm of artistic image production.

Photography is thus undergoing a profound crisis, but not one of identity (which has long been examined and pondered by practitioners and commentators alike), but one of relevance: Why is it important to produce new images?

The answer can only be addressed by producing images that consciously strive to exist on the fine line between their representational quality, their interrogation of the relationship with the viewer, and how they deal with the physical, material, and embodied melancholy of their presence. In this sense, the path for photography can only reside in the complexity of the material production process of the image, which, to justify its existence, must be the outcome of an epistemological process of editing that might culminate in images whose scale, medium, hapticity, or required distance transform them into relevant images.

Frequently, the subject matter of images consciously produced within a creative or artistic context is hardly distinguishable from the radically automated images of the smartphone. Sometimes, even their aesthetic, or indeed their technical-representational quality, may be indistinguishable.

The field of photography must, therefore, be approached from the perspective of its destiny as a material image, as an imagistic procedure that confronts, through its precise scale, its exact pagination in a book, the rigour of its editing, and the materiality of its presence, an engaged viewer.

It is in this sense that the teaching of photography is fundamental—not (or not only) as a historically transversal inquiry into the procedures that can generate images, but as an education towards an economy of relevance for each image, requiring a shared reflection on the equation that anything can be photographed, but the image is not a representation of that thing—it is the result of a process of choices and subtleties that define a relationship.

Exhibition of the Contrast project at the Portuguese Centre of Photography (2024)