

## Visual Spaces of Change

*Photographic documentation of environmental transformations*



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# **Editorial**

## **Image and Conscience**

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The constant, free, unlimited and ubiquitous availability of photographic images via the Internet since the beginning of this millennium has overwhelmed and thereby weakened the individual observer's capacity for differentiation and evaluation of image quality and content. The Internet has replaced the physical library as the premier and limitless repository of anything and everything. The physical library was once the hallowed pantheon of intellectuals; librarians were the "gate keepers" and custodians. They kept the illiterate masses at bay. The hurdles that had to be surmounted before producing a book were once set so high that writing and publishing "a book" was something open only to an academic elite. Now, no permission needs to be sought from anyone to add even the smallest or the least significant data file to the flat cloudscape. The power of deposition rests with any single person with internet access.

The constant, free, unlimited and ubiquitous availability of photographic images has the capacity to unleash countless digital files on naïve searchers like the literal and digital cloudburst. Searches on the Internet are becoming something akin to stormwater management. With time, there will not be less, but more choice, more data, and therefore an increasing need to select, that is to say, an increasing need to know how and what to select. Thus, if any individual with Internet access has effectively become the new librarian, then the Internet searcher also assumes the role of the librarian, the new interpreter of meaning if a search is to be fruitful. However, while the individual act of data deposition needs no intellectual framework, the searching person needs to be mentally prepared for the task of selection and evaluation.

In pre-Internet times it might have been legitimate to ask "How can I know what I think till I see what I say?", which, translated into an image search on the Internet today would become "How can I know what I'm looking for until I've seen what's on the Internet?" This question that is tantamount to the abdication of responsibility, the admission of the incapacitation of the mind and the beginning of an endless, meaningless search. So, how do we become versed in the how and the what to search? How do we become conscious of differences, how do we recognize significance, meaning and quality when we are confronted by it? In short, how do we become sensitive and knowledgeable about images?

Ninety years ago, at the end of his "Short History of Photography", Walter Benjamin forecasts that "Cameras will continue to become smaller, will be readier than ever to record fleeting and intimate pictures, whose shock will arrest the observer's ability for association." Furthermore, Benjamin continues:

"This is where image captions have to be applied, by which photography becomes appropriated within the literarization of all living conditions and without which all photographic constructions would just remain vague. It is not surprising that Atget's photographs have been likened to crime scenes. But, is not every location in our cities a crime scene, not every passer-by a potential perpetrator? Is it not the duty of every photographer – as a descendant of the augurs and haruspices – to uncover guilt and to name the guilty in his pictures? 'It is said that not the illiterate but the one without knowledge of photography will be the future analphabet.' But must not also a photographer, who is unable to understand his own images, be considered an analphabet? Will captions not become the most substantive part of the recording? These are the questions in which the span of ninety years separating contemporary images from the Daguerreotype discharges its tensions. It is in the light of these sparks that the first photographs emerge from the darkness of the grandfather's days in such a beautiful and inaccessible way."<sup>1</sup>

Here, Benjamin follows a rather bureaucratic notion of literariness. While he foresaw the miniaturization of the photographic process – its ubiquitous application, he could not imagine that anyone could be a photographer and that anyone could deposit images on a globally accessible archive. Even without captions or labels, today any image receives tags with the help of some AI system before being amassed in the cloud, the appropriateness of such tags being subject to the sensibility and knowledge of the AI programmer. The more poignant question is how individuals see through the truth content of an image, or, to stay within Benjamin's choice of words, how to uncover the "guilt" in an image. How does photography help the viewer to uncover the forces behind the arrested process in an image? In the context of environmental transformations, whose rate of change can be invisible to the normal eye, how do the choices that a photographer makes in taking an image affect the revelatory quality of that image?

Photographers choose the topic, the place and the point of view, the focus, the time, the exposure, the lighting conditions, the camera technology and finally the requisite post-production software. Furthermore, photographers act as curators in selecting images that they consider worthy to be published. These choices cast the photographer as a conscious actor, there cannot be any talk of serendipitous snapshots. Can there then be a difference between a photographic chronicler and

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie", *Literarische Welt*, Berlin, 18.9., 25.9. and 2.10.1931; transl. by the author.

an artist photographer? Is a photographic chronicler someone who gathers without analyzing or interpreting, while an artist photographer is someone who takes an image with an "aesthetic" purpose? And what would a photographer be called who is doing both?

Given this reflection, the discussion on the photographic documentation of environmental transformations needs to transcend the seeming matter-of-factness of the act of photography and focus inwards on content, intent or purpose as well as objecthood, objectivity of the photographed topic. It seems that the "Sachlichkeit" of photographic technology in the context of modernism's legacy has veiled the subjectivity of photography for too long now. Wars were started with photographic lies. All photographs have been granted *cartes blanches* as simplistic representations of truth; reductive modernist objectivity, originally part of the Enlightenment project, has paved the way for a new myth of objective reality. As in other fields of communication, there is a desperate need for critical analysis, on this topic, for photographic literacy.

The Internet has turned every online user into both a depositor as well as librarian, however, it has made this possible without the online user having to sharpen any critical faculties, not to speak of aesthetic sensibilities. The gluttonous availability of images via the Internet is framing the way people "see" photography in an entirely different way than when photographs first became a medium of communication in the early 19th century. Cindy Sherman's work has lost significance thanks to TikTok; Thomas Demand or David LaChapelle's works too are becoming marginalized by myriads of intentless snapshots of a similar expression.

Today, for photographic documentations of environmental changes to have any lasting significance, they will need to be simplistically explicit in their comparability with regard to recognizable changes and yet still have a similar sense of urgency and empathy that, for example, James Nachtwey's self-explanatory images have. Photographic documentations thus become accusatory, with clear ethical intent. They may appear benign, even subtle, on the surface. But once the viewer's gaze has been drawn, they unfold their content and intent. Alex MacLean's work has that quality: even as seemingly simple colourful patterns on two-dimensional surfaces they have the power to mesmerize onlookers, unlocking parts of their inquisitive brains to reveal their true environmental horror. Michael Ruetz' Timescapes appear equally innocent from afar. However, Ruetz image sequences are forensic studies in cultural transformations; they demonstrate the simplicity of contemporary human's design sensibilities on the one hand and the sustained immensity and raw beauty of nature on the other.

"Photographic documentation of environmental changes" as a title is as innocent and objective as the aforementioned modernist myth of objectivity would like to be. In the context of the global environmental change, such photographic documentation takes on an urgent relevance and an accusatory immediacy. At the most basic level, these "documents" will become the melancholic memories of what we shall have lost, at best, they will become the clarions that shake us out of our complacency.