

Global Perspectives in Contemporary Art

Representation Through Photography

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The invention of the camera allowed artistic expression to encompass not only physical interpretations of reality through expressive painting and sculpture, but also mechanical replications. The idea of photography and its role as an art form became a controversial subject in the realm of the avant-garde. Susan Sontag, American art critic and philosopher, argued that photographs are inherently aggressive and deceitful. However, contemporary artists show how photography can be used as a vehicle for change due to its intimate reality and speed of reproduction. Photography can be a platform for representation and powerful tool for social progress against stereotyping, discrimination, and other injustices.

In order to better understand photography's effectiveness as a vehicle for change, it is important to understand its conceptual difference from other art methods. In comparison to traditional art forms, photography is inherently avant-garde in its pseudo-reality. Paintings are a subjective interpretation of reality whereas photographs capture nature at a specific point in time. However, the two-dimensional print that is a photo is not actually nature and is, thus, an artificial depiction of reality. Sontag bolsters this idea with the explanation that a "single photograph or filmstrip claims to represent exactly what was before the camera's lens."ⁱ Some critics argue that this makes photography inherently treacherous in its attempt to pass as reality. German philosopher Walter Benjamin draws on the shocking nature of photography by comparing a cameraman to a surgeon and a painter to a magician. He explains that the "painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, [where] the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web."ⁱⁱ Benjamin's analogy draws on the avant-garde idea of photography as aggressive in its explicit communication of a message. By capturing a fragment of reality, a photograph destroys the "aura" or unique existence of an object because the image can be mechanically reproduced and confronts its viewer directly. In contrast, a painting maintains its individual existence and keeps a comfortable distance from what is perceived to be absolute.

A photograph's shocking portrayal of reality and intimacy with its audience gives it an unsurpassed power over traditional art forms, yet the artist chooses how to wield this power which can be beneficial or deceitful. Artists can choose to use this influence to represent important elements of society that may otherwise be overlooked. As Austrian art group WochenKlausur stated, "Art should deal with reality, grapple with political circumstances, and work out proposals for improving human coexistence," and there is no better vehicle to do so than photography which is inherently grounded in reality due to the mechanical process of capturing light.ⁱⁱⁱ

Photography can bring an intimate insight into diversity which can often help to dissolve bigotry or stereotypes. Performance artist, Coco Fusco, raises questions regarding our nation's multiculturalist identity by exclaiming that, "Culture in this country is a critical, if not the most

crucial area of political struggle for identity.”^{iv} This reinstates the shift of formalist art to art that is socially or politically charged. James Luna’s *Half Indian/Half Mexican* (1991) photo series shows how identity in photos can be manipulated to make a social critique. By depicting versions of his appearance through this self-portrait, Luna comments on the idea that identity is subjective and that appearance can be skewed to fit into the way societal categorizations. Specifically, *Half Indian/Half Mexican* comments on American bias toward Indigenous and Mexican people, and just how arbitrary those stereotypes are when identity is subjective. In an interview through MOMA’s *Open Space* platform, Luna talks of his goal to shift prejudiced perceptions through art; he calls himself an “art activist” where “art is [his] weapon of choice.”^v



James Luna. *Half Indian/Half Mexican*, 1991. Courtesy of OMCA collections.

Artist and Philosopher, Adrian Piper, demands that the idea of “art for art’s sake” be replaced with the principle “art for people’s sake.”^{vi} Piper points out the difficulty in appreciating “high art” without some absorption of the suffering, unemployment, and discrimination facing society. Artist and feminist Martin Syms pushes Piper’s principle of “art for people’s sake” by making photographic and video work that critiques American stereotyping of African Americans. Specifically, her work rejects the conventional media portrayal of “blackness.” In an interview, Syms exclaims that, “if images of black people are going to continue to be fed into an endless and cruel cycle of stereotype, we may as well control the output—present them as mundane and normal, insert them into history, and reassert them in the contemporary.”^{vii} Her photographic stills from her film, *Notes on Gesture* (2015), create a narrative around the black, female protagonist named Girl. The photograph shown below displays the protagonist in a relatively uninteresting composition with a purple background. The purple color carries symbolic meaning for the black feminist movement. The photograph was taken from Sym’s film following the protagonist’s visit to the dentist where she was denied health insurance coverage. The mundane and universal experience normalizes the protagonist, helping to halt the perpetuation of black stereotyping.



Martine Syms, Still from *Notes on Gesture*, 2015. Courtesy of Dominica Publishing and Bridget Donahue.

Photography can create an objective lens in which to view and normalize imagery deemed “taboo” by society. One of the first artists to utilize photography in this way was the Hungarian photographer, Gilbert Brassai. Brassai depicts the most liberal citizens of Parisian society in the 1930s without any biases or opinions. He notes that what matters most in photography is “that noble desire for objectivity and faithfulness to the object, that necessity to eliminate self and achieve a likeness that represents some sort of absolute.”^{viii} Brassai confirms his effort to erase any preconception or judgment by allowing his subjects to speak for themselves. This is illustrated through much of his work in the series, *Paris By Night*, where his subjects are absorbed in their own world and do not make eye contact with the camera. Specifically, in his photograph *La Toilette, Rue Quincampoix* (1932), the woman on the toilet, who appears to be a prostitute, seems unaware of the photographer as she continues cleaning herself. The man to the left of the woman is unfazed by her nudity or presence, which makes the viewer feel like an intruder. The casualness of the photo, forces the viewer to rethink the acceptance of the situation and plight of prostitution. It makes the audience confront the unglamorous, unflattering side of Parisian life.



Gilbert Brassai. *La toilette, Rue Quincampoix*, 1932. Courtesy of Artnet Worldwide Corp.

Contemporary documentary photographer, Alec Soth, also creates work that brings attention to the margins of society through an objective lens. One of his noteworthy photographs, *Mother and Daughter, Davenport, Iowa* (2004), shows two women seated on a sofa dressed in nightgowns and heels. While Soth gives no context directly stating the mother and daughter are prostitutes, the viewers can infer that based on the women's attire and expressions. The casualness in which Soth presents the mother and daughter makes their situation and profession as prostitutes less taboo. The couple appears confident and comfortable in their environment, which makes the viewer feel at ease and accepting of their status. There is nothing shocking in the photograph, except the "shocking" normality of a relationship and profession generally considered degenerate. Through this work Soth states that he felt a need to "re-engage with society" through the "authentic human community... that which is revealed by our common anxieties, our desires, our secret nostalgias."^{ix} His photography is a way for him to normalize and bring to acceptance the "secret desires" that pit people against each other. The honesty within both Brassai and Soth's photographs creates an authenticity and objectivity that work to progress stigmatized aspects of society.



Alec Soth. *Mother and Daughter, Davenport, Iowa*, 2004. Courtesy of Artnet Worldwide Corp.

While photography holds so much power as a vehicle for social change, that power requires responsibility. The photographer carries a power of deception if he or she so chooses. The way a photo is contextualized is incredibly important due to the often presumed reality a photo carries. In other words, what the viewer observes in the photo is what the viewer understands to be truth, so how the imagery is labeled and described can easily alter the viewers perception. It is by "deciding how a picture should look, in preferencing one exposure to another, photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects" according to Susan Sontag.^x Photographers control how reality is captured in a photograph, thereby giving them preeminent authority.

The idea of photography and contextualization is challenged by mixed media work like that of artist, Ida Applebroog, who challenges photography as a singular entity. Applebroog created a body of work titled *Photogenetics*, which she defines as a “series of images produced through the crossbreeding of photography, sculpture, technology, and painting. Individual images evolve from a photograph of a sculpture, which establishes a genealogical index of each subject.”^{xi} Applebroog’s work reveals how the contextualization and even dissection of photographic imagery can vastly impact the meaning. For example, her piece shown below *Untitled, Photogenetics Series* (2005) displays a photo of molded clay that Applebroog transforms into a representation of a human with braces. Upon first glance, it is unclear what parts of the artwork are real or “photographic” and what parts are handmade. Applebroog challenges the viewers perception of what a human form should like and what identity consists of. The ambiguous portrait demonstrates how photo can directly challenge reality, and with it, societal conventions.



Ida Applebroog. *Untitled, Photogenetics Series*, 2005. Courtesy of Art 21.

Similarly, artist Taryn Simon challenges the contextualization of photography and its potential devastating impact. In her photographic series, *The Innocents* (2005), Simon photographed men and women who had been wrongfully accused of heinous crimes and were freed after years of imprisonment. In the case of the subjects in this series, “photography offered the criminal justice system a tool that transformed innocent citizens into criminals, assisted officers in obtaining erroneous eyewitness identifications, and aided prosecutors in securing convictions. The criminal justice system had failed to recognize the limitations of relying on photographic images.”^{xii} Simons ironically notes how the power of photography can go wrong. In the case of the criminal justice system, the photos of the perpetrators were used to falsely accuse the innocent people because the photos were received as undeniable evidence. This is problematic because photographs can be contextualized in a way that can make them appear vastly different than the reality. Because photography is a powerful tool of documentation, it is important that photographers have integrity and that viewers also maintain a level of distrust when observing photos. Additionally Simon comments that, “Photography’s ability to blur truth and fiction is one of its most compelling qualities. But when misused as part of a prosecutor’s arsenal, this ambiguity can have severe, even lethal consequences.”^{xiii}



Taryn Simon. *Larry Mayes*, part of the *The Innocents* series, 2005. Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Photography.

Sontag refers to photography's ability to document and proliferate important messages. She points out that photographs, "are a means of making "real" (or "more real") matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore."^{xiv} In many situations, photographs can capture a reality that is not accessible to other parts of the world; this is a powerful tool to showcase injustices and create more global awareness of the issues at hand. In the same way, photography can break down cultural conventions surrounding stereotypes and discrimination. While photography can be deceiving in its pseudo-reality, its vivid communication, speed of reproduction, and intimate portrayal of subjects, make it a more powerful tool for social change than traditional art forms.

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- ⁱ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Picador, 2004), 3 -36
- ⁱⁱ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (London: Penguin, 2008), 8.
- ⁱⁱⁱ WochenKlausur, "From the Object to the Concrete Intervention." Sourced from www.wochenklausur.at (2005).
- ^{iv} Jeff Chang, "Imagine Ever Wanting To Be," *Who We Be: A Cultural History of Race in Post-Civil Rights America*. Martin's Press: 2014; 143 – 166.
- ^v Geraldine Ah-Sue, "Speak to the Unspeakable: James Luna and Geraldine Ah-Sue in Conversation." *SFMOMA Open Space*, May 2018.
- ^{vi} Adrian Piper. "Some thoughts on the political character of this situation." *Art of Conscience: The Lost Decade*, 1980.
- ^{vii} Amanda Hunt. "Martine Syms: Conscious Resistance" in *Aperture.org*. Sourced from <https://aperture.org/blog/martine-syms/> (December, 1, 2018)
- ^{viii} Alain Sayag, *Brassaï: The Monograph* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000), 15.
- ^{ix} Mick Brown. "Photographer Alec Soth: 'To Me the Most Beautiful Thing Is Vulnerability'" in *The Telegraph*. Sourced from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/photography/what-to-see/alec-soth-americas-greatest-photographers/> (September 26, 2015).
- ^x Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Picador, 2001), 7.
- ^{xi} Ida Applebroog. Sourced from <http://idaapplebroog.com/> (December, 1, 2018).
- ^{xii} Taryn Simon. "Taryn Simon: The Innocents" in *Museum of Contemporary Photography*. Sourced from <http://www.mocp.org/exhibitions/2000/5/taryn-simon-the-innocents.php> (December, 1, 2018).
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xiv} Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Picador, 2004), 3 -36.