



Teaching about Photography: Photographs and Contexts

Terry Barrett

Art Education, Vol. 39, No. 4. (Jul., 1986), pp. 33-36.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0004-3125%28198607%2939%3A4%3C33%3ATAPPAC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-P>

Art Education is currently published by National Art Education Association.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/naea.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Teaching About Photography: Photographs and Contexts

In the last issue, I identified the nature of photography as *selectivity, instantaneity, and credibility*. This article explores implications of these characteristics that distinguish photography from other media and photographs from other pictures. The most important implications are distinctions that bear directly on interpretation of photographs. Because photographs are segments excised from large, real-world situations and because photographs are instants frozen from a real-world temporal flow, we ought to attempt to replace a pictured segment back into the unpictured whole. We need to do this to understand what a photographer has done to an original real-world situation in order to posit what a photograph is *about*. Understanding the differences between a picture and the reality from which it was made is essential to understand and appreciate the photograph. Without considering these distinctions, the photographer drops out, and the photograph becomes transparent; the viewer is left mistakenly considering the photograph as a real-world object or event rather than considering it as a person's picture. Similarly, appreciation of photographs is dependent on recognizing and understanding a transformation the photographer has made in excising the segment and instant to make it aesthetically noteworthy rather than routine or mundane. Viewers who want to understand and appreciate a photograph need to see what fresh and significant relationships the photographer may have brought about

and the means used to make them manifest. Considering context allows this. Contextual information can be "internal," "original," or "external."

Internal Context

Internal context is that which is given in a photograph, that which is evident. This is an obvious starting point in any interpretive effort and entails description and analysis of what is seen in a photograph. Methodologies for investigating the apparent in a picture are clearly stipulated in Feldman's (1981) steps of description and analysis, Broudy's (1983) scanning, and in phenomenological art criticism (Kaelin, 1973; Lankford, 1984). Attention to a photograph's internal context involves identification of subject matter, consideration of its form, and relationships between the two. Photography brings its own set of formal elements and terms, beyond those shared with paintings and drawings and prints, that ought to be learned and investigated. Focus, depth of field, angle of view, shutter speed, types of illumination, grain size, tonality, contrast range, and other photographic variables should be explored to see how they effect the subject matter and how form and subject combine to express.

Several photographs require no more than some general knowledge of culture and careful attention to what is shown. Two examples of photographs that require no more than an investigation of their internal contexts for interpretive understanding are a photographic ad for Panzani tomato sauce and a 1959 Pulitzer Prize press photograph. Roland Barthes (1964), the late scholar of cultural

In this article . . . Barrett continues his discussion of teaching about photography. "Without considering these distinctions, the photographer drops out and the photograph becomes transparent; the viewer is left mistakenly considering the photograph . . . rather than considering it as a person's picture."

Bill Seaman, 1958, *Wide World Photos*. What is contained within the edges of this photograph, its "internal context," is sufficient for its interpretation.



from sources outside the photographs themselves. A careful look at her pictures would not yield an understanding within a range of interpretive tolerability. Levine has copied pictures by Walker Evans and exhibited them as her own under the title "After Walker Evans." Another Levine exhibition "Trouble in Paradise" shows copies of Mondrian's paintings. Richard Prince, another Postmodernist, has been rephotographing and exhibiting others' photographic ads that originally appeared in magazines. To decipher any of these exhibitions requires knowledge of Walkers' photographs and his stature in photography history, Mondrian, and art history, and at least some of the tenets of postmodernist art theory.

Examples of photographs that require contextual information outside the photographs themselves are plentiful outside the world of art. One example is Nick Ut's press photograph of a naked girl and soldiers fleeing from smoke and running toward us at the front edge of the photograph. This is a horrifying image no matter what; it is all the more horrifying for those who know that the children are Vietnamese, the girl is burning and has torn away her clothes because she has just been sprayed with napalm. This photograph has become a visual metaphor for American involvement in Viet Nam, but the photograph, itself, reveals very little. It is knowledge about the circumstances surrounding the photograph that makes it more than a picture of apparently terrified children.

It is original, contextual information that render such photographs meaningful. Original context broadly refers to that which was physically and psychologically present to the photographer *at the time the photograph was made*. More specifically, to consider the photograph's original context would be to consider the photographer's intent, if it is available, and biography; the intellectual, imagistic, and stylistic sources of the work; the relation of the

signification, analyzed a magazine ad for a French tomato sauce by attending to what was there in the ad: packages of pasta, herbs, tomatoes, onions, peppers, and mushrooms emerging from an open string bag, a can of the tomato paste, and the word *Panzani* in large type set against a background of red and green. Barthes analyzed the ad (pp. 33-35) according to its denotations and connotations. The word *Panzani* is the brand name of the tomato sauce, and it connotes, by its very sound, "Italianicity." The photograph denotes tomatoes, peppers, and other things, but connotes several messages: a return from the market with fresh ingredients good home cooking, total culinary service, Italian cuisine (the predominant reds and greens), and beauty (the lush still life of the photograph), all concentrated in a can.

Similarly, the Pulitzer Prize photograph, by Bill Seaman, contains what is needed for its interpretation. In the photograph's foreground are a crushed wagon on the pavement of an intersection of two neighborhood streets and a blanket draped over a small body shape. A policeman writing on a pad of paper stands next to the blanket shape, and a medic is walking away from it. Some children and women and drivers in passing cars are looking on. The photograph is about a child run over by a vehicle, and it is *apparently* and correctly so. Although many photographs can be understood and appreciated solely on the basis of what is shown, many others cannot.

Original Context

Sherrie Levine's photographs are inscrutable without information drawn

Robert Doisneau, 1958. Various "external contexts" have radically altered the meaning of this photograph.

photograph to others contemporary to it (those of the photographer and other photographers and artists); and the social, political, philosophical, and religious character of the times.

Exploring all these aspects could be thorough, but exhausting, and some of the information gathered might prove irrelevant. Scholars of photography, however, do engage themselves in such thorough research to sort the relevant from the irrelevant. Although students would not routinely involve themselves to this extent, they might occasionally be posed with this range of interpretive questions and considerations. Learning how critics and historians think and work and occasionally thinking and working like critics and historians would be the students' educational benefits.

External Context

External context refers to the photograph's presentational environments: how and where it is being presented, has been presented, received, how other interpreters have understood it, and where it has been placed in the history of art. The meaning of any photograph is highly dependent on the context in which it appears. Gisele Freund (1980) discusses a photograph by Robert Doisneau that pictures a man and woman drinking wine in a Paris cafe. Doisneau was fond of cafes, and seeing the two together he was charmed and asked if they would allow themselves to be photographed. They consented; his photograph of them appeared in an issue of *Le Point* devoted to cafes. Sometime later, without Doisneau's consent, the same photograph appeared in a small brochure about the evils of alcohol abuse published by a temperance league. Still later, again without Doisneau's consent, the photograph appeared again, in a French scandal sheet with the caption: "Prostitution in the Champs-Elysees." All three presentations were convincing, and the gentleman in the photograph sued the scandal sheet and was awarded recompense. The



photograph since has appeared in at least two other contexts; the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection and Szarkowski's (1973) *Looking at Photographs: 100 Pictures from The Collection of The Museum of Modern Art* (p. 64).

Quite obviously, these five very different presentations of the same photograph radically influence readings of the photograph.¹ Photographs, most of which are relatively indeterminate in meaning, are easily *overdetermined* by how they are presented, especially when accompanied by captions, headlines,

or longer texts. No photograph is presented without context, and its presentation is at least a pre-set orientation to its interpretation. The *National Enquirer* is infamous for its misleading, deceptive, and seductive headlines, captions, and stories that surround its photographs of celebrities. A photograph of Eldridge Cleaver on the dustjacket of *Soul of Ice* or on a FBI wanted poster would carry very different but persuasive messages. Similarly, the same photograph of a hunter and slain deer would trigger opposing orientations if it appeared on the cover of *Sports Afield* or *The Vegetarian Times*. Critics of popular media often lament juxtapositions of photographs of starving Biafran children set opposite lush photographic ads for perfumes, or television's cutting from a holocaust scene to a commercial for "Cat's

1. For a fuller treatment of this photograph and a different treatment of contextual considerations in relation to all photographs see Barrett, Terry (1985), Photographs and contexts, *The journal of aesthetic education*, 19 (3) 51-64.

Meow." These examples show how presentational environments affect our responses to photographs.

At least, students should examine how presentational environments influence understanding of any photograph. When text accompanies a photograph, attempts should be made to determine whether the words are by the photographer, an editor, or a curator. Duane Michals, for instance, writes on his pictures, and the writings should be considered part of his pictures. An editor's caption or curator's statement, however, are forms of interpretation. There are other factors in external context that are also important aids to understanding. Simple facts of name, title, date, medium, size, and source of the reproduction² are important clues to interpretation. Even "Untitled" indicates that the photograph is to be considered a work of art. Similarly, "UPI" or "AP" under a photograph is different than "from O.K. Harris Gallery, New York." Some photographs, such as "The Sterrage" by Alfred Steiglitz have a rich and extensive art history; some photographers, such as Edward Weston have written diaries; and some photography exhibitions have received much written criticism. Never to take advantage of these alternative viewpoints when trying to understand a photographer or an individual photograph is intellectually remiss.

Conclusion

Internal, original, and external context are distinctions that serve to remind us of sources of information about a photograph, and they can be examined in attempts to interpret a photograph. Sometimes the information is rich and

other times meager. The less information we have about a single photograph, the less chances of reducing the ambiguity of that photograph and forming a correct interpretation. This can be demonstrated with students by asking them to interpret a photograph made by a photographer unknown to them. During the discussion previously researched, verbal and visual contextual information can be introduced by the teacher and built into students' efforts to reach a reasonable and well-defended interpretation of the photograph. Initial interpretations can then be compared to a final interpretation to show whether more information changed the group's understanding of the image. Additional strategies follow for alerting students to the import of context in interpreting photographs.

Internal context and selectivity (Part I) are inherently related: what we see *in* a photograph was selected by the photographer. Students can use existing photographs from magazines, calendars, or reproductions and mask objects or people in the photograph, foreground, or background to see how missing elements affect meaning. What *is* in the photograph can be speculatively compared to what might have been outside the photograph when the photographer made the picture. What was immediately to the left or right of the frame? Regarding instantaneity (Part I), what happened the instant before or after the picture was made? What was going on in the artworld and the social and historical world contemporary to the photograph? Photography students can be asked to make pairs of images of the same subject matter that dramatically suggest different interpretations: one close or far, one to the right or left, or pairs shot at different time intervals.

Students can experience how meaning and effect of a photograph can be significantly altered through its placement in an external environment by making their own presentational

environments for their photographs. They can write false but believable captions and headlines or switch captions from one photograph to another. They can alter the meaning and emotional effect of a photograph by surrounding it with other photographs. They can present an art photograph so that it looks like science or present a scientific photograph so that it looks like art. A discussion of what and why it happened would be important to any of these activities. Examples drawn from popular media and the artworld would show that these are not unrelated to what happens outside the classroom. *The National Inquirer* is frequently accused of slander; museum curators arrange photographs for new theoretical insights and greater emotional impact; photomicrographs made for scientific research are published and exhibited as art; and NASA photographs are used to sell products. In the next issue, I will offer six categories into which photographs fall when they are examined contextually. ■

Terry Barrett is an Assistant Professor of Art Education at The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

References

- Barthes, R. (1964). Rhetoric of the image, in *Image-Music-Text*. New York: Hill & Wang.
- Broudy, H. (1983). A common curriculum in aesthetics and fine arts. In *Eighty-second yearbook of the national society for the study of education*, Part I. Chicago, NSSE.
- Feldman, E. (1981). *Varieties of visual experience* (2nd ed). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Freund, G. (1980). *Photography and society*. Boston: David R. Godine.
- Kaelin, E. (1973). *The philosophy of aesthetics: A phenomenological approach*. Saratoga Springs, N.Y.: Empire State College.
- Lankford, E. L. (1984). A phenomenological method for art criticism. *Studies In Art Education*. 25 (3), 151-158.
- Szarkowski, J. (1973). *Looking at photographs: 100 pictures from the museum of modern art*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

2. Elsewhere (e.g., A structure for appreciating photographs, *Exposure: the journal of the society for photographic education*, 18, 3 & 4, pp. 50-54) I have included these under "internal context" since, in a logical sense, they are givens which come with the photograph and are part of the photograph. For pedagogical purposes, however, it seems better to keep things simpler by having "internal context" refer only to the physical picture.

LINKED CITATIONS

- Page 1 of 1 -



You have printed the following article:

Teaching about Photography: Photographs and Contexts

Terry Barrett

Art Education, Vol. 39, No. 4. (Jul., 1986), pp. 33-36.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0004-3125%28198607%2939%3A4%3C33%3ATAPPAC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-P>

This article references the following linked citations. If you are trying to access articles from an off-campus location, you may be required to first logon via your library web site to access JSTOR. Please visit your library's website or contact a librarian to learn about options for remote access to JSTOR.

References

A Phenomenological Methodology for Art Criticism

E. Louis Lankford

Studies in Art Education, Vol. 25, No. 3. (Spring, 1984), pp. 151-158.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0039-3541%28198421%2925%3A3%3C151%3AAPMFAC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-N>