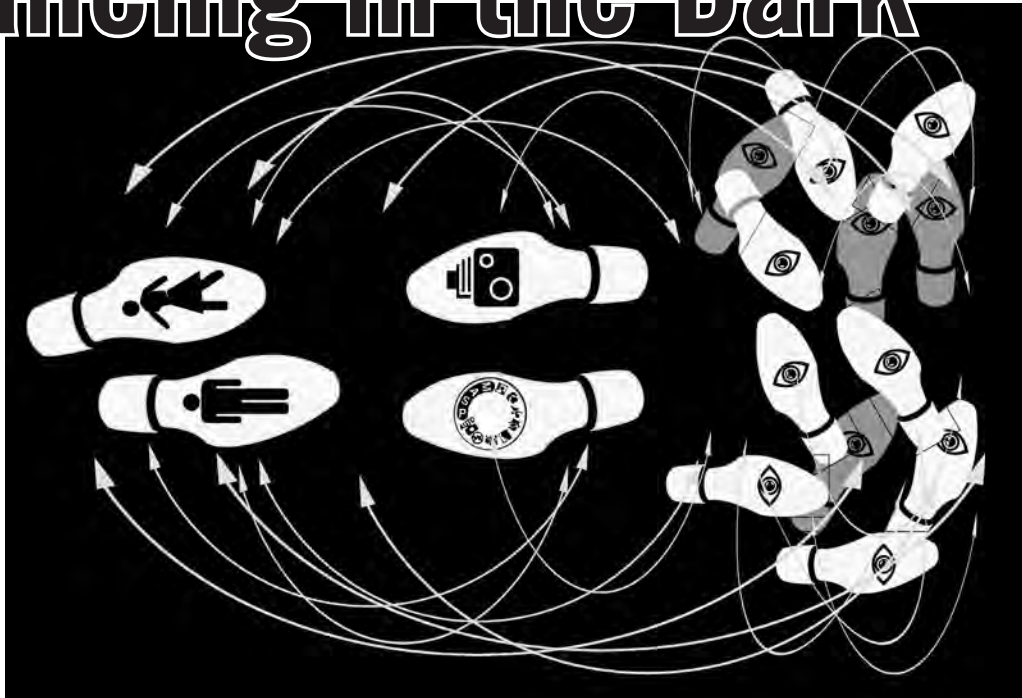# Dancing in the Dark

Performance as a Design Concept in Photography

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I believe that the rarest and most valuable thing in the world today is empathy. We must have empathy for the natural world and for each other regardless of cultural, religious and ethnic division. Empathy also requires imagination and this is the realm of creativity. I believe that a precondition for the existence of art is an empathetic link between the artist and the viewer, which is necessary for their collaboration to complete the artwork. Because of this the presence of art in the world necessarily encourages empathy. I think this is true for all art but it works most dramatically when the art involves an embodied experience for the viewer. (Anthony Bond, 2008)

We are being buried in photographs! I think my eyes are getting numb! The nearly 1 billion images per month uploaded to facebook is just one piece of evidence (http://royal.pingdom.com/2010/01/22/internet-2009-in-numbers/) that shooting and sharing photographs is both easy and casually essential. The expanding variety of exposure-mode icons on most modern cameras clearly indicate that we are being encouraged to divide our lives into simple, pictorial genres. Do I feel like a 'Party" or a 'Portrait'? Am I having a 'Macro' moment or a 'Meal'? Maybe I should just give up and go 'Auto'. Let the camera decide! Can visual information, formulaically designed   and packaged in automatic, easily digestible bits desensitize our creativity?

These changes present interesting challenges to art teachers. How do you teach art as the 'thoughtful practice of expression through making' when individual pictures are so automatic and commonplace that they almost don't seem to matter at all? Can photographic art be created using 'Auto Mode'? These questions might imply that the art of photography is to be found in the camera and the visual 'products' we create with it. The tools are definitely important, but is there more?

One of the legacies of the western modern art tra-dition in school curriculum is the tendency to think of design in the art classroom in very formal terms. If all of our critical attention is contained within the frame, then we ask students to manipulate materials through processes with focus on things like how shapes are organized into compositions with sensitivity to choices like balance and focal points. Of course, the frame isn't the limit. Our 3 and 4-dimensional engagement

with the material world can be reflected through sculpture, installation, video, performance and more. It is important to recognize that these time and space-based experiences are necessarily much more explicitly embedded within communities and cultures highlighting the social and political aspects that resonate through all art at some level. I would argue that the 2-D discourse can also be broken open a bit with photography. While paintings end at the edge of the canvas, we typically assume that the image within the borders of a photographic print represents a selection from a larger, earlier moment that somehow 'really happened'. As viewers, photography forces us out into the world. In this article, I am going to shift the discussion away from photo design concerned with the final product of the print, and consider the embodied experiences of being photographed, making photographs and viewing photographs as a collective, improvised performance art that is a fundamental part of photographic design.

More than other art forms, designing a photograph involves creating with a series of situations. The first situation is that planned or accidental moment in time where camera, subject and photographer converge. With candid street photography, achieving the 'decisive moment' (Cartier-Bresson, 1952) might involve quick reactions and visual focus where the relationship between subject and photographer falls into the classic stereotype of hunter and prey. At the other end of the spectrum, contemporary tableau photography, like that produced by Jeff Wall (Osborne, 2011, p.24), Gregory Crewdson (Larocca, 2008) or Carol Conde and Karl Beveridge (Sekula, 2009) involves meticulous preparation where the photographer works more like a producer or director and the participants are performing parts that are often closely rehearsed and run through as often as needed to get the final shot that the artist envisions. At both extremes and in-between, there is an embodied relationship that develops and dissipates that is as much a creation by the subject as it is the artist. Whether a photo depicts people, places or objects (or, as is often the case, all of the above), photo critics have long noted how much unintended information is included in every photograph. Whether a negative or digital file, the accidents tell us as much about the relational nature of 'picture taking' as it does the artist's intentions.

Whether you work in a darkroom and think of yourself as a printmaker, or work in a computer lab and describe your process as 'post-production' much of the material craft and aesthetic consideration of photography occurs during the second situation. In some form of studio the individual photographer retreats from the world to reframe the work as a printed or digital composition working most self-consciously as a designer and visual communicator. As the photographer selects, composes and imagines exhibiting a work, both the subject and viewer might be conceptually in the room, but they are muted. Photographers like Scott McFarland (Mcfarland, 2011, http://www.scottcmcfarland.com/) who combine hundreds of carefully photographed elements into detailed final works, might think of each photograph as an 'asset' used to build the complex, realistic and yet impossible landscapes that question the nature of the medium. Photographers like Alfredo Jaar will work with single images as he did using extreme close-up shots of the eyes of a young Rwandan genocide survivor (Gutete Emerita) to create a complex installation intended to push through all of the media noise and confront viewers with the humanity of that single, important child (Jaar, 2011, http://www.alfredojaar.net/). In these cases the artists worked, selecting fragments, and organizing them with creative purpose intended to challenge the viewer to question what they were seeing and not seeing.

The third situation develops when a viewer experiences the image on screen or as a print. I would argue that most compelling art in any medium is experienced through questions the work generates for the viewer. These questions might focus on the physical work of the artist, they might attend to meaning in the content (whether representational or not) and might also be sensitive to the context where the work is found and how the whole experience situates that viewer. Because lens images push beyond the frame, all of these questions can be in play simultaneously, requiring the viewer to participate in the production of the work in unique ways. One compelling example where the lines between subject, artwork photographer and audience were intentionally mixed is a show first exhibited at the 'Women in Focus Gallery' in the early 1990s by the 'Kiss and Tell Collective' (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiss_and_Tell_collective) where a sequence of progressively more erotic self-portraits by the artists together were shown with an invitation specifically to women viewers to 'Draw the Line'

by writing their responses and comments on the walls around the images. In this case a selected group of viewers were given a radical invitation that had a direct impact on the art. In a broader sense, journalistic photographers face this question constantly when their role as witness to world events shifts between that of viewer, image-maker and subject. Max Kosloff describes photographer Horst Faas' dilemma in 1971 when he realized that a prisoner was being bayoneted to death because he was present as a journalist and representative of the western media (Taylor, 1998, p. 13). In this case, his role as a viewer carried immediate, ethical consequences that are evident in the design of the final images and how they position us as less direct viewers.

Early performance artist, Allan Kaprow's, initial ambivalence with photographs documenting performance art is echoed in more current work by Hayley Newman in Connotations - Performance Images where she created photo documents of performance pieces that never happened (Newman, http://www.hayleynewman.com/artworks/ show/15). In both cases, their focus was on prints as inadequate substitutes for the dynamic complexity of the performance experience. However, as Irvine (2004, http://www.mocp.org/exhibitions/2004/10/cameraaction_pe.php) suggests, both performance art and photography depend on the active work of the audience as collaborators in media that are creative because they are not fully controlled by the artist.

By drawing on theory about performance art, I hope to focus teachers and student photographers on the notion that in the experience of making a photograph the art includes consideration of time, space, and relationships between the subject, artist and viewer. Somewhere between the formal traditions of design within the frame (Feldman, 1992), the postmodern understandings of design as a reflection of social structuring (Gude, 2004), and performance art's insights into the provocation of embodied, dynamic expression (Kaprow, 2009) we find photography's odd hold on visual culture. What follows are four studio strategies that each explore different aspects of designing photographic performances.
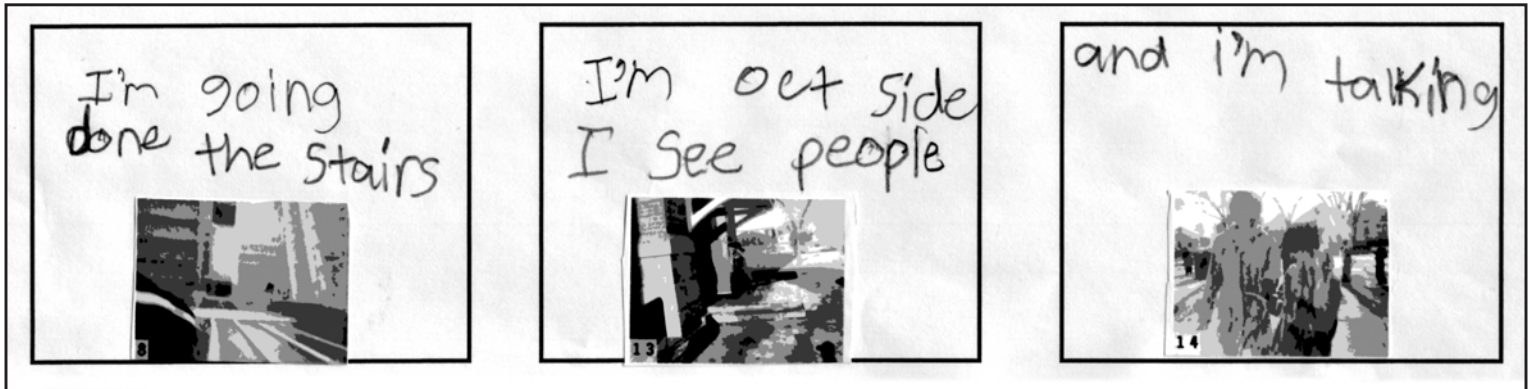
Recess Photo Storyboard
'Samid'   2004   Figure 1

Before and After: Still-Storyboarding & Photographic Narrative(s)

This can be approached artfully or academically. As your students organize themselves to pursue a photographic project, introduce them to the three-frame storyboard, and let them know that one of their photo creations will be featured in the centre frame. The first and last frames are to explore 'before' and 'after'. Guide a discussion about the creative rolls that the subject and viewer of their image might play as well as the work that they do as photographer that happens outside of the frame. Negotiate potential media (photo, drawing, writing, or?) that can be used with the outer frames to complete their still-storyboard. It may be that some of your students qwill want their storyboard to function like a comic. Point the Scott McCloud's Understanding Comics (1992) with special attention to the pages focused on frame sequence and meaning. Other students may want to use their frames as documentary journal spaces documenting the preparation and exhibition of the image in the center. Still others may want to fill their frames with more reflective before and after journaling. The example (see figure 1) shows work by a grade 5 student using their frames to imagine how the literal moments before and after the playground scene they photographed.

Thinking about photography as choreography doesn't have to be limited to images of people. The focus really is on the meanings possible in the many relationships that revolve around the photographic experience. Artists, historians and critics all understand that photography evokes a very intense sense of time past. Original images provoke experiences of time, place or relationship and details of memory. Re-photography is a strategy that positions the photographer as an archivist, a viewer, and sometimes as a critical researcher. Inspired by Jo Spence's early work in therapeutic self-portraiture a number of photographers (Dick & Moffatt, 1989) have explored re-photography

Self-portrait with Projection
Monica Emme   2011   Figure 2.

as a way of re-entering important moments in family photo albums by re-enacting documented childhood moments as an adult. Sometimes critical and sometimes comical, this re-photography works to construct a second view of family history. The photograph included here (see figures 2&3) combines a contemporary self-portrait with a projection of a family home from the past. In this case the juxtaposition of past and present offers technical and design challenges and poses questions about life experiences and influences. Other examples of re-photography have concentrated on revisiting historic sites and carefully creating a second image based on the first photographer's framing and position has been actively practiced since the 1970s (Atget's Paris: http://usfinparis.arts.usf.edu/paris/paris/atgetrephoto.html ; American western landscape: http://www.thirdview.org/3v/home/index.html ; of locations in the TV show Twin Peaks: http://www.intwinpeaks.com ; etc.)

Re-photography can be a great way to consider the personal meaning of topics from geography, history, earth science and even health.
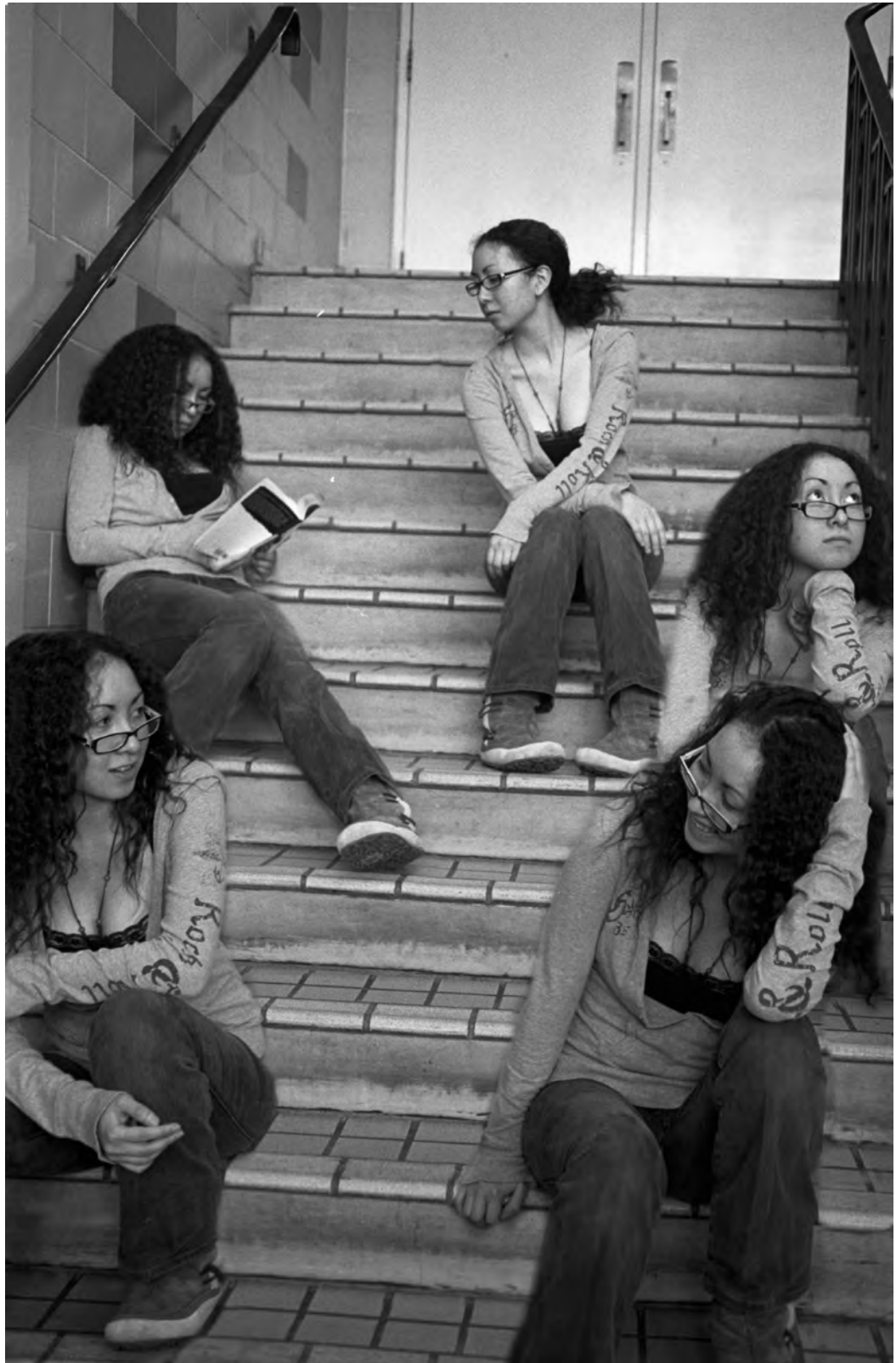

Self-portrait with Projection
Monica Emme   2011   Figure 3.

Here and There: Multiple Images & Time in Photography

If all photographs are collaborations, then making an image of a friend should really be a unique conversation made visible. Because single images are such limited fragments of that relationship, capturing its complexity in a single moment is a particular challenge. With digital photography and computer-based editing, working with multiple images is far more accessible. Early photographer, Eadweard Muybridge used multiple cameras tripped in sequence to capture the biomechanics of a horse running. His later images of nude male and female models photographed with the same initial scientific curiosity about the body in motion also reveal much about his assumptions regarding 'gender-typical' behaviours (1955). Layered portraits disturb the timelessness of the single image. We become more aware of the subject's body language and their role in performing to the camera. As viewers, the multiple points of view make us more conscious of the photographer and less likely to simply accept their perspective as our own. The digitally manipulated portrait (see figure 4) combines 5 film negatives in a playful tableau where Brittany crowds a school stairwell with aspects of herself. Subject, photographer and viewer are all busy making meaning with his photograph. To borrow from themes explored at length by the philosopher, Deleuze (1986, 1989) Muybridge's image is about movement while Emme's collaboration with Brittany is about time. The older image can be read quite literally, while the newer cannot and provokes more questions because of the playful ambiguities.

Brittany
Monica Emme   2008   Figure 4.

Me and You: Social Networks & Photography as a Commodity

Many of the still images and videos we experience today are seen through the internet. The power of social networking has been significant to world events. Whether helping earthquake survivors find medical help in Haiti or activists gauge government response to protest in Egypt, internet tools have played an important part. The idea that community can be built around the exchange of images assumes that these images are easily reproduced and exchanged. This article opened with a bit of a moan about the problems when images are so numerous. Certainly art seems to depend on the preciousness of images, but much of the innovation in communication focuses on downplaying the value of objects and concentrating on the value of community. The example (figure 5) is a detail from an exploration of these many themes. A cabinet of curiosities made of personal nick-nacks and mementos has been photographed and turned into a series of buttons. The buttons were exhibited in a traditional gallery space with detailed and sometimes intimate notes about the objects depicted. Viewers were invited to take a button but asked to leave a minor object from their pocket or purse in exchange. As the buttons are selected and their wearers disperse three works are created, one through convergence the other through dispersal and both linked by a social network signified through a collection of buttons. This is the design of photography as performance art.

Conclusion

If design, like the art assumed by Bond at the beginning of this paper (2008), is about empathy, then both the modern impulse to find good form and the more contemporary need for an ecologically informed good community have a part. As art educators we have a central role to play in challenging our students to grow their empathy through creative critical play that is both the legacy and the mandate of the art classroom. In the camera we have a tool that each student needs to understand as an essential part of their engagement with the world. Through learning the form and the technology of photographic art they can come to discover the amount of control they might have in their visual culture if they understand how to take it. Through learning about the relationships and the performance of photography, they can come to understand the humanity and community that can be developed and communicated through photographic art.

Endnote

Transmogrification: A Cabinet of Curiosities (detail)
Monica Emme   2011   Figure 5.

1. Villem Flusser (Flusser, 1985) has suggested that a first human millennium focused on spoken communication and understanding drawn from direct sensual experience of natural phenomena. Hand-working objects, storytelling and ritual served to remember, communicate and make sense of the world.

In time, we humans became dissatisfied with the idiosyncrasies and 'magic' thinking or "idolatry" (p.18) behind this earliest approach to understanding remembering and sharing knowledge. Out of this impatience and need grew the great human innovation of the second millennium. Writing and scientific abstraction developed into a powerful way to store and share knowledge. Instead of individuals performing knowledge as a ritual or spectacle, books allowed ideas to be sequenced, controlled and exchanged with greater ease. Much of what we consider progress can be linked to the efficiencies that written language afford. These benefits make it understandable that we have invested growing faith in words and numbers as a way to know and communicate about the world. In the past decades, however, growing global communication has made us aware, often in visual, visceral ways, that our progress can be destructive to the environment and certainly hasn't benefited the people of the world equitably. Flusser, however, has argued that growing visual technology has allowed us to recognize and question what he describes as our own "textolatry" (p.85), the belief in the written word is the singular tool for knowing and communicating. Before Flusser, Walter Benjamin's Marxist influenced dreamed (Benjamin, 1936) of stripping away the elitist 'aura' of the unique artwork through the mechanical reproduction of images. He understood prints and photographs as giving popular access to visual information. Art in the age of mechanical reproduction meant that images would be an important and daily part of social and political life for what they communicated rather than serving as scarce objects for the rich. As digital pictures are replacing the written word in global communication, Flusser identifies a form where renewed links with the visual from the first millennium blend with the powerful capacity to store, distribute and exchange information that we recognize from the second. We are entering a third millennium of communication where much of what we know and communicate will be through the "Technical Image" (p.15)

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