Photo: Michael J. Emme & friends

Feeling Beyond the Frame
Photography as an Empathetic Performance

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Abstract

 Art forms that involve mechanical and digital intervention would seem the least likely exemplars for illustrating Bond's claim for "art as an empathetic link between the artist and the viewer" (Anthony Bond, 2008). And yet, photography, more than any other art form, requires a series of permeable situations that imply relationship in ways that are uniquely connected with a world that extends beyond the artifact of the photograph. With acknowledgement of early notions of 'the gaze' (Mulvey, 1975) and 'the glance' (Flitterman-Lewis,1987) as they inform critical readings of 'the lens media' (Emme, 1989) and informed by more recent theoretical disruptions (Miles, 2005) and appreciations (Sutton, 2009) of technics, desire and the photographic, this paper explores the participants and situations of photography with a particular focus on how engagement with/through the mechanics of the frame inflects empathetic response (Manney, 2008) among the participants in the sliding categories of subject, photographer and viewer.

Keywords: Perception, Memory, Phenomenology, Technology, Empathy, Play

The evolving body language of Photography

Seeing people looking down their noses at an i-phone held at arm's length while casually photographing friends, food, a mundane moment, or a crisis, is commonplace and remarkable. I am struck by the emergence of a new photographic body language, with its hand gesture and head tilt suggesting both the bold pointing of a child and the mannered formality of a minuet. Balancing between
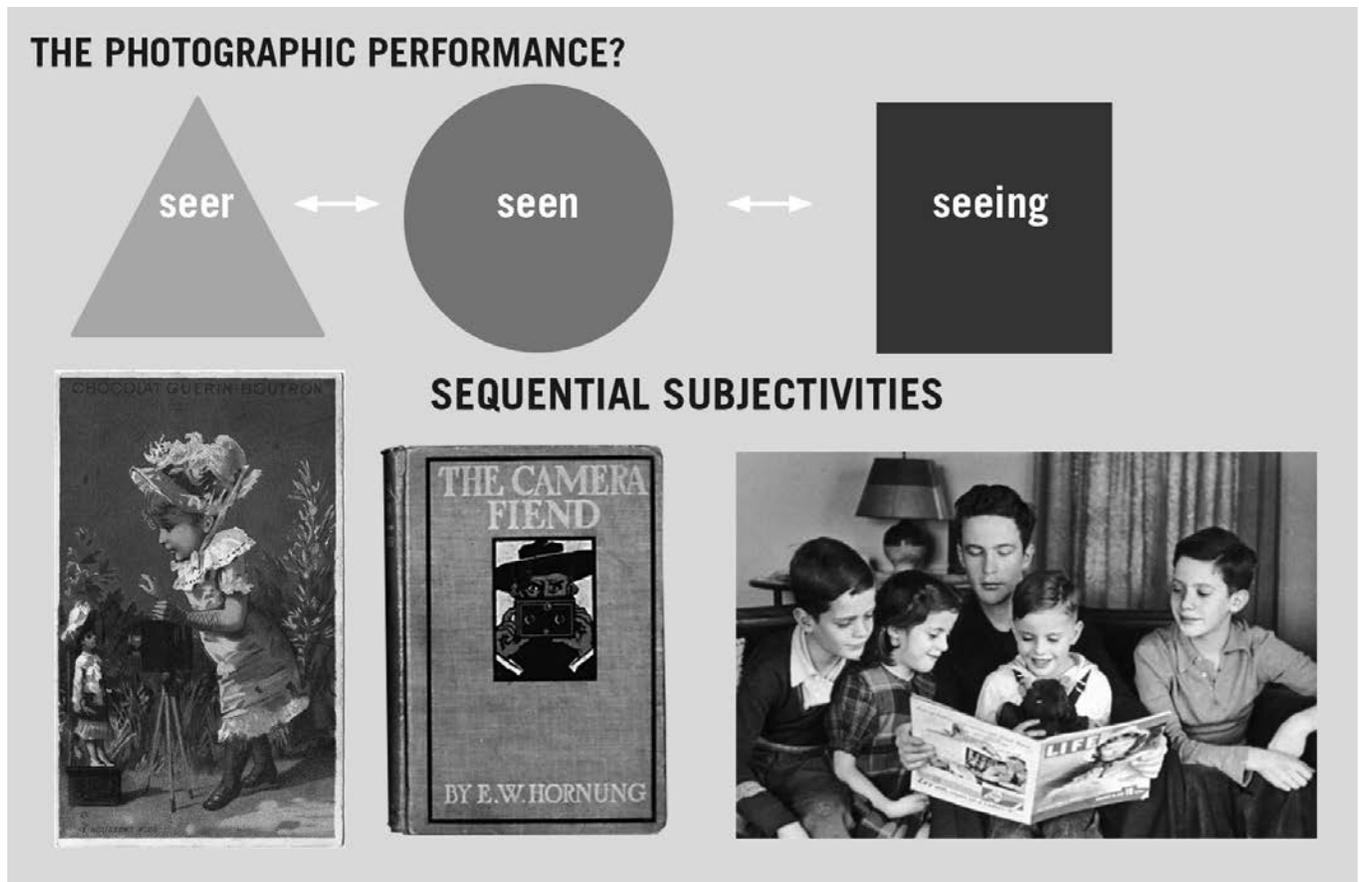
wonder and ritual, this new approach to camera work hints at an emerging shift in the relationship between subject, maker and viewer, a fusion of subjectivities. The small digital screen supporting an immediate glimpse, a *live view* experience of *the real*, represents a re-choreography of the social performance of photography. This is not the first time changes in photo technology have introduced new steps and postures to our collective dance around the camera. Each technological generation has evoked a posture that speaks to the relationship between the user, the tool and the times. The predatory/voyeuristic intimacy of sighting on a target through a Vietnam era Nikon SLR replaced the 40's journalist's scrum where hacks shouted "just one more" while competing for space with a jumble of simultaneously balanced, shot and reloaded Graflex Speed Graphics cameras. The humble shrug of the mid-20th century serious hobbyist, chin to chest with a twin-lens reflex at the belly, snapping family, flowers or holiday sights replaced the first serious amateurs, those artful scientists, awkwardly bent, ostrich-like, with head in a box draped beneath a dark cloth conducting visual experiments. So, change is not new, but *live view* introduces an element of collective play that has changed the art and social place of the medium.

It is now a truism that "the best camera is the one you have with you"(Jarvis, 2009). With cell phone photography, many travel with a camera in pocket or purse that accommodates shooting in the moment, sharing the viewfinder with collaborators and subjects alike and both instant viewing and distribution. The ubiquity of photo technology incorporated into cell phones, i-pads and laptops is that photography is much more closely connected to daily communication. The expense and delay of film process has been replaced by digital immediacy. As early as 1952 Louis Mumford (1952/2000) commented on being vigilant about ensuring that technology was designed to serve our desires rather than to define them. The question posed by these new photo technologies is whether the innovations are a response to desires or drivers of them.

Not only are we seeing more images, but we are also producing and sharing more as well. This is not an exclusively passive endeavor, as some might fear, though, as philosopher Vilém Flüsser(2000) suggests, the camera, effectively a technological *black box* for most users, is designed to support certain consuming behaviors. The programmed exposure dial with simple graphics of image genres (group shot, macro still-life, landscape, sports, plate of food, etc.) subtly defines subject matter, though for most cell phone users, even that level of aesthetic decision-making is invisible. From an art educator's perspective, these are powerful, challenging times. Digital imaging alters our relationship with materiality and craft in art making. The online exchange of information expands student access to the inspiration of other artists' works. Social networks offer unprecedented access to both the opportunity and consequences of audience and collaboration. The current form, availability and connectivity of the camera means that art as *identity work* has shifted from the self-portrait to the "Selfie"[1]; the formal ordering and social theorizing of the Tableau is replaced by the chaotic engagement of tumblr feeds and *accidental* aesthetics (Ballard, 2012). Realism is experienced through the immediacy and consequence of digital activism or cyber-bullying (Shariff, 2013). The classroom, like the camera, demands new approaches to creative relationship. This paper will reflect specifically on photographic body language and its implications for empathy and exchange between the participants in the photographic dance with the end of contributing to the work between art educators and their students in discovering and creating new curriculum.

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The relationship between technology, the body and meaning

The idea, that human empathy is impacted by growing dependence on the technologies we create, draws together two contemporary concerns that resonate through the arts, sciences and education. Anthony Bond makes the claim 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. (Bond, 2008)

While Bond's suggestion is the kind of heartening assertion that goes over extremely well as arts advocacy, it raises the question of what he might mean by empathy. Coining of the term *empathy* from the German concept *Einfühlungsvermögen* to propose intersubjectivity as a psychological capacity, dates

to just more than a century ago. Though reflected in the arts and philosophies across history and cultures, empathy specifically emerges as a concept with the beginnings of psychology as a science in a western context. That context is colored by world wars, rapid industrialization, and an individualism defined by expanding media and capitalism. In its first 100 years, research around this notion has been expansive and sometimes controversial, ranging from Husserl's many reflections on the phenomenology of intersubjectivity (Zahavy, 2012) to de Waal's explorations through animal studies and mirror neurons (2008) of biological drives behind empathetic response. The notions of intersubjectivity and empathy have developed in the sciences as a response to urbanization, industrialization and the fragmentation of community.

More recent writers have evolved these concepts to include more than strictly scientific insights. Jan Zwicky (2003), in arguing for the converging of poetry and philosophy (that is, the converging of the lyric and the rational) describes engagement with the world in terms of *resonance*. Her metaphors, which are primarily auditory, describe all exchange as meaningful ecological interminglings that are only evident through attentiveness. The form of her writing, designed to provoke attentiveness, often presents pages of lyric aphorisms next to pages of analysis, merging linear and nonlinear impulses to invoke the metaphysicality and the materiality of meaning in a context that sidesteps some of the hierarchical pitfalls that have accrued to the concept of empathy. Braidotti (2006) cites Donna Haraway to expand the possibility of intersubjectivity further by unfolding the notion of posthumanism, where our relationship with technology

> …as a hybrid, or body-machine, [where] the cyborg, or the companion species, is a connection-making entity; a figure of interrelationality, receptivity and global communication that deliberately blurs categorical distinctions (human/machine; nature/culture; male/female; oedipal/non-oedipal). It allows Haraway to think specificity without falling into relativism in the

quest for adequate representation of a generic post-naturalistic humanity. (Braidotti, 2006, pp. 200-201)

Rather than understanding human relations with animals and technology as having inside (human) outside (not human) elements, Braidotti argues that those relationships should be understood as part of *being individual,* as a process where the simultaneous presence of a mixture of influences results in identity and understanding. Thus, from the perspective of this paper, rather than looking at photo technology as a barrier between individuals seeking an empathetic connection, it is worth understanding empathy as being built of human and technological parts. Rather than stepping over the technological to find the human, if we recognize that human relations with technology quickly become intermingled, each becomes necessary elements in the process of relationship as it is experienced and understood.

Meta-art forms that involve mechanical and digital intervention would seem the least likely exemplars for illustrating Bond's claim for empathy through art. And yet, photography, more than any other, integrates technological possibility with a necessary series of permeable situations (subject present with photographer, photographer present with image, image present with viewer) that imply relationship in ways that are uniquely connected with a world that extends beyond the artifact of the photograph.

'Live View' and empathetic performance.

The idea of "Lens Meaning" (Emme, 1989) suggests that photo technology accommodates a spectrum of relationships between the subject, photographer and audience that can encompass a range of intentions in all three roles. In each, the capacity to take on a self-conscious and active role in a process of representation exists, though historically these three roles have been kept separate by the limitations

of the technology. In the past, an active photo subject could give advice or perform for a photographer, but embracing both roles simultaneously was a challenge. Though *instant* processes existed, monitoring or responding to an image entailed some degree of processing time that separated subject and photographer from viewer. The power involved in the moment of framing and in the approach to viewing has been explored by Allan Sekula (1984) through the metaphors of the window, the frame and the mirror where he described the relationship between realism, artifice and the unconscious for the subject, photographer and viewer of a photo. Relevant to this paper and its focus on the new body language of the *live view* viewfinder is Laura Mulvey's late modern feminist critique of the film apparatus that supported what she suggested was the phallocentric dreamlike voyeurism of *the gaze* (1975). Like the darkened theater space, many early cameras, from early view cameras to SLRs, involved an immersive viewing experience, offering a gazing space for the photographer that was both entrancing and isolating. Miles (2005) has argued that in the first 150 years in the history of photography the relationship between light and lens, shutter and film, whether approached critically or in appreciation, has served to amplify the impression that photo technology offers either immanent truth or its opposite, an insurmountable barrier. In the last decade, the technology has allowed photography to become both more and less intimate.

In fact, the separation between subject, maker and viewer has been collapsing for some time. Miles' (2005) references the heat and instability of light in re-reading the history of photo art and technology, suggesting a more fragmented but also more approachable sense of the medium and its meanings. Earlier, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis (1992) recognized in the more domestic and distracted apparatus of the television a reframing of the body where the viewer glanced at visual stories while being interrupted by ads, food and whatever living domestic drama might be within range of the viewing experience. Arguably, the filmic experience supported the traditional conditions of an *aesthetic experience* where identification with characters and situations evoked empathetic response. Television, often considered a

lesser art, offers a far less unified context, though its growing capacity in communicating images and stories into the home at historical or significant moments has created an immediacy that has served a more naturalistic empathy (fetishized in some sports and *reality* television programming). Just as television's *live view* screen encourages a distracted gaze or glance where images and stories merge with friends and situations in an immediate jumble, digital photographing encourages a televisual approach to photography where participants in lived events hold the cellphone screens up in one hand, mixing the distance of a screen view with the immersion of actual participation. Self-consciousness becomes part of the image making process. Subject and viewer infuse with the engagement and meaning of the lived moment.

I assert that the live view screen in newer digital cameras supports mobility and simultaneity in experiencing the roles of subject, photographer and viewer. The example of self-photography, where an individual can frame a shot of oneself while viewing a digital screen and where both the lens' perspective and the final image file can be experienced immediately, creates a simultaneity that supports both phenomenally spontaneous experience and heightened self-consciousness. This convergence of light, lens and shutter with subject, photographer and viewer supports what Panton would describe as a "technophenomenological" (2005) embodied experience of a self-subject as a fully empathetic representation. As Sutton (2009) argues, the photograph, as it is gathered and distributed through new digital technologies, has undergone a fundamental shift by being far less anchored to the camera frame or print, becoming far more effective at communicating the complexity of time and memory. While this photographic accumulation of access and facility carries many dangers (including spiraling narcissism and deep vulnerability to unkind others), it also suggests how engagement with/through the technics[2] of the frame inflects empathetic response (Sutton, 2009) among the participants in the sliding categories of subject, photographer and viewer.

Questions regarding how and even whether we can know each other and if tools serve as resources or barriers in our search for intersubjective insight, are essential themes across modern and contemporary visual art practice such as in films from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927)·to Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* (1997), *in* literature from Orwell's *1984* (1949) to Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and embodied in performance artists Stelarcs (2013) many prosthetic experiments in cyborg evolution. Among art educators, Garoian and Gaudelius (2001) focused on performance artists such as Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Orlan and others as exemplars in the critical work of discerning the relationships between technology, the body and both personal and cultural identity.

Vilém Flüsser (2000) likens photography not to work with a tool, *Homo faber,* but to playing in an immersive environment, *Homo Ludens,* where the technology functions less like a game piece than an elaborate field that must be played against. "Unlike manual workers surrounded by their tools or industrial workers standing at their machines, photographers are inside the apparatus and bound up in it" (Flüsser, 2000, p.27). He describes the photographer as seeming to control (through external decisions of framing, shutter and focus) an apparatus that is literally and metaphorically a black box that is largely mysterious, likening the relationship to a Kafkaesque narrative where we assert control over a game in which we have no competence. In the case of contemporary, casual cell phone photography, all of the work of making an image is inside the camera and carried out without immediate human engagement. The photographer is left only to play at capturing images of self, others, meals and moments. Ultimately Flüsser understands the technology of photography as subordinate to more elaborate apparatus such as the advertising industry and media, suggesting that tools, like the camera, are designed by manufacturers to serve the rules of performance games. The challenge, according to Flüsser, is to avoid allowing the role of functionary, like an animated pawn, to be imposed on us through the photographic game as defined by various media forces and embedded in the camera as apparatus.

For Gadamer, too art is essentially play: but, even though it has implications for the nature of the spectator's engagement, this characterization is meant to emphasize "neither the orientation nor even the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself"(1987, p.101) The process of art making effects what Gadamer terms a "transformation into structure" (1987, p.110) which detaches the work from the activity of the creative artist, to foreground the meaningfulness of the content that the artwork conveys. That content consists essentially in the work's re-presentation of aspects of the world and of experience. In recognizing the import of a work, the agents involved do not simply register its reference to something familiar; in understanding art, "[t]he joy of recognition is rather the joy of knowing more than is already familiar"(1987, 113) From Gadamer's perspective, then, an artwork itself embodies new insight. That insight may be variously applied and integrated into the experiential horizons of different viewers and audiences, but this variability in interpretation is tempered by a common sense of the work's transformative power.(Pake, 2004)

Depew describes empathy in its most contemporary sense as a "repair concept….[W]e restrict this new empathy to the shared or mutually projected feelings of human beings, or those animals where we experience some resonance of human psychology" (2005). Focusing on this notion of performing mutuality, Flusser's description of photography as a field of play, and Gadamer's understanding of the playfulness of art, it seems clear that the new technologies of photography that break down the barriers between the subject, photographer and viewer represent an intimate opening for creative work by students. In discussing photography beyond the stillness of single images Sutton emphasizes the mobility of the digital and cell phone image

> whose movement through the world – from expression through image to deletion – is a mobility
> of images not related to an object or objects, but to a series of projections and translations of

thoughts and ideas, remembrances and conjectures….the photograph has become reaffirmed in its role as surrogate or metaphor for processes of perception and memory and the creation of identity (personal and public) that relies on these. (Sutton, 2009, p.314)

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Endnotes

1. The history of self-photography as both a political and a narcissistic gesture dates back to Hippolyte Bayard's self image as a drowning victim in 1840 to protest being ignored as an inventor of photography. The ubiquity and ease of cell phone cameras along with wireless distribution has opened individuals to the power and hazards of instant media exposure through the production of 'Selfies'. Jackie Flores, Lauren Quilty, Cindy Donnis, and Jade Ulrich, *Feminist Instagramming + Its Discontents* Scripps College.Edu. http://arthive.scrippscollege.edu/2012-2013/ART_183/Heresies3.pdf (accessed June 31, 2013).

2. As the term was coined by Lewis Mumford in is early analysis of the meaning of technology (see: Mumford, 1952/2000).

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