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Dissertation Proposal

Within my dissertation, I will be continuing an investigation of three keywords that are relevant and impactful to my chosen practice. I will be researching *Significance*, *Haunting* and *Reminiscence*, with focus on studying the different characteristics of these keywords and how they effect and impact not only the photographic image, but the way we view and connect with photography.

Significance is '*the quality of being worthy of attention; importance*' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022), something that deserves to be noticed and acknowledged for its importance and meaning. But what makes something significant?

Significance is referenced and interpreted in many ways as, like most things, it is subjective. Everyone can feel that somethings are more important, meaningful, or significant than others whether it is from a personal perspective or from a cultural one. But in the art and design industry, when it comes to producing artwork or an art piece itself, people are expressing themselves and how they feel, allowing people insight into their interpretations and views on what they deem as relevant or significant.

'Reproductive technology, we might say in general terms, removes the thing reproduced from the realm of tradition. In making many copies of the reproduction, it substitutes for its unique incidence a multiplicity of incidences.'

And in allowing the reproduction to come closer to whatever situation the person apprehending it is in, it actualizes what is reproduced', (Benjamin, 1935, p.7)

Walter Benjamin discusses how in an age of mechanical reproduction; art will start to lose its value and authenticity through reproducibility. The more that we reproduce or replicate art, objects, and so on, the replicas will no longer have the same impact and significance as the originals, as they will be lacking *'the aura'* (Benjamin, 1935, p.7) the original would have. *'We can say: what shrinks in an age where the work of art can be reproduced by technological means is its aura.'* (Benjamin, 1935, p.7) Here Benjamin highlights how the act of reproducing something, or making something reproducible, may gain value financially but loses its value in place and time through its *'aura'* (Benjamin, 1935, p.7) and essence, the things that give it meaning and significance.

'This is why it is precisely in death that the power of the photograph is revealed and revealed to the very extent that it continues to evoke what can no longer be there.' (Cadava, 1997, p.13)

Eduardo Cadava discusses how, in photography, after death a person's essence lives on through their photograph, particularly when it comes to working with analogue photography. There is a personal relationship between the photographer, the person photographed and the image itself. This is possibly a result of how long it can take to capture the image, therefore creating a more

personal connection then if you were to capture the image digitally. This does not mean to say that an image captured digitally has no meaning or significance, but in this instance Cadava is expressing the way in which a photograph might lose its value if it were to be reproduced. Having one image that was captured through the means of analogue photography, holds the personal experience with the person photographed, making it differ from a quick photo captured digitally, or possibly a scanned copy of the original. It creates a barrier between the work and the viewer, in a similar way to if someone was to go to an event or concert and be watching through their screen on their phone whilst they film it, instead of being there to experience it for themselves, creating a barrier between them and the experience itself.



Figure 1

This photo (figure 1) was taken by NURPHOTO and used in a Vanity Fair article, it shows visitors taking pictures of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa in the Louvre, Paris, in April 2018. It illustrates a literal distance and barrier between a person and the artwork itself, not only in a physical sense but through the use digital means to witness and capture the moment. However, one could argue that they are not really being able to experience the artwork in its entirety and are reduced to only being able to witness the work through digital means. It is a very real example of how reproducibility has created a situation in which an artwork is no longer valued for its significance to the artist and what the artwork was made for to begin with, but now valued through profit and status.

'The Mona Lisa was certainly more famous after the heist, but World War I soon consumed much of the world's attention...Over the decades, as technology improved, the painting was endlessly reproduced, sometimes manipulated and sometimes not, so that the sitter's face became one of the most well known in the world, even to those who had little interest in art.' (Zelazko, 2022)

As stated here, by Zelazko, the fame of the painting has also impacted the way that it is viewed, not from a physical standpoint but from a cultural one. The way that the original intention of the Mona Lisa has come to be overridden by the social response to the way that it has been interacted with, almost giving it a second hand 'aura' (Benjamin, 1935, p.7) and stripping it of its core significance.



Figure 2

From this it is evident that *Significance* goes hand in hand with the ‘*aura*’ (Benjamin, 1935, p.7) and the essence of something in the way that they are what surround an object, the essence is what can give something its significance, through its meaning. It is not necessarily the object itself that is significant but what it represents.

Haunt or haunted is ‘(of a ghost) manifest itself at (a place) regularly’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022) something that recurs regularly whether it is through memory or something physical. It does not necessarily have to involve a spiritual ghost.

‘To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construct of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time.’, (Derrida, 1993, p.202)

Haunting is something that manifests itself frequently. This therefore does not necessarily mean something is physically present, it can be anything, it can even be a recurring memory. This is the idea that Derrida is discussing here, referring to haunting as being a necessary concept, concept being ‘*an abstract idea*’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022). Not limiting oneself to believing it must be something physical, it can be seen and thought of more broadly.

Derrida also discusses the concept of '*Hauntology*', (Derrida, 1993, p.202) which is combining the term haunt or haunting with the term Ontology '*ontology seeks the classification and explanation of entities. Ontology is about the object of inquiry, what you seek to examine*', (Hammond, 2017) An object of enquiry that you set to investigate further. Combining both haunting and ontology to create hauntology, a phrase used to discuss the return of an element from the cultural past. The elements are often referred to as ghosts due to the way it is not physically present, (which is why ghosts are associated with the description of haunting). In particular, these ghosts refer to the 'dead' futures that haunt the present.

'the return of what was once there takes the form of a haunting.' (Cadava, 1997, p.11)

Despite the concept of something being haunted not necessarily being that of a ghost, Cadava discusses how when it comes to the photographic image there must be such a thing as ghosts '*The possibility of the photographic image requires that there be such things as ghosts and phantoms*' (Cadava, 1997, p.11). This is through the belief that there is a relationship between life and death when it comes to photographic images '*relation between life and death that structures the photographic event*' (Cadava, 1997, p.11). His concept comes from the way that even after someone has passed, their photograph will live on, continuing after death through the way a person's history lives on when

they are gone, along with that person's history in the afterlife, *'The survival of the photographed is therefore never only the survival of its life, but also of its death'*, (Cadava, 1997, p.13). Leaving behind pieces of themselves that remain important to the living, and yet haunted by their memory and death,

'In photographing someone, we know that the photograph will survive him-it begins, even during his life, to circulate without him figuring and anticipating his death each time it is looked at', (Cadava, 1997, p.13)

Discussing and addressing the possibilities of the photographic image throughout the course of a person's life and death. I feel that the concept of hauntology is relevant for Cadava's statement *'to circulate without him figuring and anticipating his death each time it is looked at'*, (Cadava, 1997, p.13). It is relevant through how the photograph is now a reminder of what is lost, a ghost from a future that never was, haunting those that remember them.

'They can carry a strange echo of the very process of memory', (Gibson, 2008, p. 82)



Figure 3



Figure 4

These two images were taken by Simon Ward for his photo series *The Guardians*, 2018. These are toys left at children's memorials, each one scanned and put back exactly as they were found as the images are meant as no disrespect to the families or the children. *'The objects function as an attempt to compensate for the loss by creating something tangible, a receptacle for the placing of memories.'* (Ward, 2018) Ward wanted to capture the objects in that moment in time, he described the toys as *'emotionally charged objects'* (Ward, 2018) further emphasising how you could almost feel the emotion that surrounded each object. Scanning the objects rather than just photographing them brings the viewers that much closer to the objects themselves, knowing that the objects were that close that Ward himself it allowed him the chance to

feel the emotion that haunted them. In an off putting and slightly disturbing way it also brings the viewer closer to the deceased in the way that the objects are singled out in darkness, alone with nothing other than an abyss of black. As the objects themselves slowly decay and are no longer recognisable as they once were, the objects themselves are not only haunting, but as are these images.

Reminiscence is ‘a story told about a past event remembered by the narrator.’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022) to reminisce is to remember or recall something that has happened through the exploration of memories.

‘When children look at images of their parents as children, they are looking at their past, at the time before their own existence and at the origins of their own possibility.’ (Gibson, 2008, p.80)

This suggests that reminiscing something does not always mean to remember or recall something that you have experienced for yourself, it can be to recall memories through a family album, or locations that someone has been to or used to go to in the past. Margaret Gibson addresses the way in which children view photography, in particular the photographs of their parents when they were children and young adults. Gibson talks about how they themselves have no lived memory of the events in the photographs *‘there is no relationship to lived memory at all’* (Gibson, 2008, p.80) and goes on to suspect that they perhaps do

not fully acknowledge the images as facts and what was real, but rather as a hazy fantasy.

'I suspect that for very young children this information is a bit like a fairy tale or a hazy idea until a stronger sense of fact and reality grounds their thinking... As children and parents look at photographs together, a bridge between the past and present is created, through stories, conversation, questions, and answers.' (Gibson, 2008, p.80-81).

Giving an example of how photographs from the past could and can be interpreted and remembered, going on to say that to recall memories through photographs and conversation is not limited to having been experienced by both parties for people to bond and connect with them,

'It is not necessary for memories to be shared through the common bond of living or having been alive at the time and place of the photographic image... At some point in time, they may remind us of something, someone or somewhere that, at present, is forgotten and irretrievable. In this respect, even banal or poorly executed images may offer something of value in the future.' (Gibson, 2008, p.81)

Gibson refers to the how in the future photographs will allow us to potentially reminisce memories or events in our lives that have been documented. Whether they are poor quality or badly taken images they will still remind us of things that at the time of looking at them do not remember straight away. But does

looking at a photograph truly allow us to remember an event or memory in its entirety, as it was when we experienced it?

'Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory... but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory', (Barthes, 1981, p.110-111)

Roland Barthes suggests that photographs themselves never truly capture the essence of a memory, well at least not your own memory. If someone else has taken a photo of you and you look back on that photograph, you are not seeing it from your own perspective, but rather the point of view of the person taking the photo. Even if a camera was left on a timer to capture the 'memory', it will still only capture the reflection of a memory and show the photograph from an outsiders' point of view. Barthes makes the point that once you have looked at a photograph from a time in your life that you remember, you will no longer remember the events from your own perspective, due to every time you go to think about it you will remember the photograph, therefore replacing your original memory of the event with a 'counter memory' (Barthes, 1983, p.111).

'Photographs remind us of the discontinuity of memory, the elisions and gaps, without filling these in. Indeed, photographs like all our recording technologies, capture fragments in a continuum of oblivion and forgetting.' (Gibson, 2008, p.86)



Figure 5



Figure 6

These two images (figure 5 and 6) were taken by Simon Ward for his 2018 photo series *Ghosts in the screen*. These images are Kindle screens that were broken and damaged whilst they were still turned on, capturing and freezing the malfunctioning and broken screen in a particular moment in time. *'Through the failure of the device, digital anomalies are revealed through the last screensavers of well-known historical writers.'* (Ward, 2018)

They too are not accurate captures of an event but rather a fragment of what once was. Rather than showing an accurate depiction of what was actually on

the screen last, it shows another point of view, something that was not supposed to be seen. A literal example of a falsified memory from the past, replacing what should have been remembered with a fragment of the truth hidden behind a 'counter memory' (Barthes, 1983, p.111)'.

'The electronic book merges with the photographic, that evokes a failed but beautifully fixed image reminiscent of a 5x4 inch glass plate or daguerreotype.'
(Ward, 2018)

Even this statement from the artist implies that the object is mimicking a previous or alternative photographic process from the past, rather than looking like what the object truly is, creating a false narrative.

Concluding my dissertation proposal, it has been discussed the ways in which Significance, Haunting and Reminiscence, link to how we view photography in different circumstances. Giving insight into the way not only artwork and the photographic image can be manipulated and influenced by the changes in time, but how we view the artwork, and photographic image can as well. Using the views and concepts from Walter Benjamin, Eduardo Cadava, Jacques Derrida Margaret Gibson, and Roland Barthes, as well as to my own ideas in conjunction with theirs. This research has led to a elevated interested in the alternative elements of the photographic image and how we view and interoperate them. This has led me to choose my Dissertation question as:

‘What is the relationship between a person and the photographic image, and how are they formed?’

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