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Illustrations

Figure one: Ut N.(1972)*The Terror of War*.Vietnam

Figure two: Khaldei Y.(1945)*raising a flag over the reichstag*.Berlin

Figure three: Breson H.(1932)*Hyères, France*. France

Context, Intention, Perception

In this body of writing I will attempt to link the connections between the context of an image and the intentions of the photographer and how it was subsequently perceived by the audience and how that affects the work in terms of meaning and design. This will be using the phrase "l'art pour l'art" and how the effects of these words have in its definition and will be focusing more on the grey area of the phrase.

Context

In 1972 during the Vietnam war a photo originally dubbed "The Terror of War" (Ut, Nick) but now more commonly known as "Napalm Girl" was an image that was credited as one of the major factors that ended the war due to its shocking visuals especially at the time. The image itself is a perfect depiction of its original title, it being a documentary image it was meant to be seen with the context of the time but also with adding more to what was known. "But more memorable than the moving image were the stills that flooded the screens, newspaper and magazines." In the time where information was accessed by everyone through different mediums newspapers and magazines still had the edge because they could still show images as intense as this one. The image itself became so popular because it depicts what you might consider a full story with the clear smoke from the village to the children running, but once more the importance of this image comes from the new perspective of the innocent lives involved and the horror that was being in the cross fire.

The importance of a story being told in an image can not be understated as that's what can go on to influence people which with this particular photo it could be argued that it influenced the end of the war. "I see the photo as a story, first I would think what the story is, for me photographs are not mere objects. I love those photographs which have humans in them. Whenever I clicked humans, the thought in my mind was how to help them. The sight of the homeless, the sight of the stranded... If my photos can help them I am happy." In telling the story through the image he took he subsequently helped the people in Vietnam by telling their story.



(Figure one)

This is not to say that you need a story or context in your image or artwork for it to be affective as often the context can change and develop into something more than it was meant to be. To go to the extreme you might consider any artwork or photograph with additional context to in itself be incompletely, deriving from the idea of the French phrase "l'art pour l'art" (art for art's sake) which Oscar Wilde heavily emphasised. With this idea of an autotelic work one must think about such work as David Hockney's retelling of the famous Greek pantheon narcissist and how even without knowing that story you can see the complete human condition within this work.

None of this is to undervalue the photo by Ut but instead shows a questionable comparison of what the context of work should be but also what it should do. Because the painting does not have any external context it will not have its story changed over time, whereas the photo in question is and has been vulnerable to change. As the photographer himself stated he was just trying to capture the story that was unfolding right in front of him but instead his image has become this icon of what a single photograph can achieve. With its roots being in a horrific

incident it quickly became less of a representation of the event and with being the end of the Vietnam war.

Although the two works that are mentioned are completely different it brings into question what the context for art should be but also where photography stops being art and where it starts. Does the work in question have to be a lie or exaggeration of the as Wild put it “the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature.” Or even that it requires “the monster of my fantasy” (Baudelaire, 1859).

Intention

The way in which work is intended and how it is viewed by the chosen target is often understated in its value as it can often influence a large majority of people. A great example of this is the well known photograph dubbed “Raising a Flag over the Reichstag” taken by Yevgeny Khaldei and the image stands as one of the most images taken during the second world war and was even mass produced by many publications. The way in which it was presented to the general public was actually manipulated in the dark room to remove one of the watches that was on the second figures arm. In the text by Anne Applebaum's *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944-1956* she touches on this “Wristwatches seemed to have almost mythical significance for Russian soldiers, who would walk around wearing half a dozen if they could. An iconic photograph of a Russian soldier raising the Soviet flag atop the Berlin Reichstag had to be touched up to remove the wristwatches from the arms of the young hero.” The reason this is so important is because without that second watch you see you two brave soldiers that are bravely fighting against a common enemy, but the inclusion of the watch changes the tone from heroism to a story of mutual violence. To give some context the second watch itself is from where the soviet soldier had been looting bodies of German soldiers as a form of revenge, the photo itself on the other hand was a staged shot and meant to be a response to the image “raising the flag on Iwo Jima” but was meant to instead boost the soviet popularity.



(Figure two)

With this in mind the image itself was solely for propaganda and shows that the value of this image wasn't from recording a moment but instead fabricating one and presenting a more likeable hero character within the image. Comparing this to arguable inspiration for this image, “Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima” taken by Joe Rosenthal which was a candid shot, the overall outcome was the same. They both conveyed a sense of victory and established their soldiers as heroes of the images and both share a similar reputation when it comes to how iconic they are.

This brings into light the idea that maybe the context doesn't matter if you present the images in a certain way but I guess you could argue that the context behind the soviet has in more recent years developed into a prime example of manipulation of the image. It is also worth noting that the unedited version of the image has more historical value because of the events it tries to hide and that could be argued as more important.

The argument to be made here is does the context matter when its presented in another way, much like going back to the previous quote from Wild is the Lie any different from idea of the truth and in this example I guess not overly. The whole manifesting of the lie is in fact more interesting than the truth as there is simply more to read into it than the other image but without that external

context the way its presented to is still just as powerful. The way this shot was designed was meant to be a hero story and with the times that what it became even if it changed in later years so for its original purpose it hasn't stood the test of time unlike the other image.

Perception

The perception of artwork is more about the individuals response to the work and their interpretation of it against the artists or photographers intended reflection or better put "perception is conditioned by a context from which observation and evaluation are made." The way an image or artwork is perceived by the general public in comparison to how it was intended to be by the artist can often differ due to their being a lack of a universal way to evaluate art, but often there is a middle ground with an agreed upon interpretation. One such artwork by Henri Cartier-Bresson of the cyclist in his decisive moments work, a seemingly straight forward piece, actually conveys a deeper conceptual meaning which is never directly stated towards the audience and there for has been taken to mean different things. Photography before this time was mostly considered to be documentary so to take an image with motion blur what of been a missed shot but the use of it here implies a deeper meaning, this 'deeper meaning' is very much consistent with a lot of postmodern work and to reiterate it doesn't directly tell you any part of whats happening unlike say Duane Michals narratives pieces. Rather than hinting towards a deeper meaning in work that might not have any actually there, Michals work directly tells you there is a deeper meaning by showing these short stories of which influences emotions whether through relate-ability or simply empathy it is always clear what is happening. As Michals put it himself "I think photographs should be provocative and not tell you what you already know. It takes no great powers or magic to reproduce somebody's face in a photograph. The magic is in seeing people in new ways." He tells the audience new concepts that they can recognise while alluding to something bigger, but it is all about how and what the individual sees only in this work it is what Michals wants them to see. Going back to Bresson and his more than less direct approach as he puts it "To me, photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event." When he refers to an event it is very likely he is talking about the decisive moments that he is so famous for capturing meaning the significant in many ways may not be obvious to the audience but for him when he's taking the shot it is very clear.



(Figure three)

This leads to the idea of whether or not what the audience walk away with is the intended concept of the work or even if that actually matters at all. As with the previous works the audiences opinion as a collective can differ over time or even as the individual it mean different things. This interns brings up the question whether or not the concept behind the artwork should be left to an individuals perceived response or should it be influenced into what the artist intended. As stated before a lot of what can be identified as true artwork is that which is autotelic meaning that it is complete within itself and combining that idea with the concept of the perceived conception creates this notion that the individual needs no context to what is made to understand it or at the very least extract their own individual concept for work. Much like a mirror it could be theorised that the audience will reflect their own beliefs onto the work which is what fundamentally influence

what they see. With that in mind you could consider that any work with an interpretation to be a non autotelic work and therefore not considered true art.

Exploring these ideology, or better put as fundamentals, of Context, Intention and perception and seeing how they influence one another is more than interesting and brings into question how far you can push them before you break what might be considered rules of the art world. The big takeaways is this idea that artwork has context which might take from external narrative and if it does is considered the same way or does it require a piece to be complete in its self? With that said does leading into intention have a hold over the context if it is altered or does the alteration become part of the context of the image meaning it can not be autotelic? Lastly the idea that individual has the ability to walk away with there own take on a particular piece which could be more down to their own influences and experiences being projected onto the perceived work and how that affects the takeaway of the artist. Most of what this leads to is the idea of what makes true bits of art and the argument for and against "l'art pour l'art" as it expresses how true art should be outside any influence but to what degree one could call 'influence' could be argued to varying degrees. The Expression its self is defined as being "divorced from any didactic, moral, political or utilitarian function." But does that apply to the perceived affect, considering the "Napalm girl" which was a documentation shot which was then perceived by the public as a moral stand so does the intention of the photographer decide if it works in that context or is it down to the public? So what then is the real difference between this piece or any documentary piece again something like the work of Duane Michals or Henri Cartier-Bresson?

The question one must ask is : Does the defining feature of what is consider 'true art' have to apply to the phrase "art for arts sake" or is the phrase itself fundamentally flawed? Can true arts intention be to exploit the context of the time or should it be autotelic?

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