

Research in Practise - *Dissertation Proposal*

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“We are going through a crucial historical crisis in which each year poses more acutely the global problem of rationally mastering the new productive forces and creating a new civilization. Yet the international working-class movement, on which depends the prerequisite overthrow of the economic infrastructure of exploitation, has only registered a few partial local successes. Capitalism has invented new forms of struggle while camouflaging class oppositions through various reformist tactics and exploiting the degenerations of working-class leaderships. In this way it has succeeded in maintaining the old social relations in the great majority of the highly industrialized countries, thereby depriving a socialist society of its indispensable material base. In contrast, the underdeveloped or colonized countries, which over the last decade have engaged in the most direct and massive battles against imperialism, have begun to win some very significant victories. These victories are aggravating the contradictions of the capitalist economy and could be a contributing factor toward a renewal of the whole revolutionary movement. Such a renewal cannot limit itself to reforms within the capitalist or anticapitalist countries, but must develop conflicts posing the question of power everywhere.” (*Debord, 1957*)

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t reads as though it could have been written about our current situation, does it not?

This situation that we find ourselves currently; where we play passive to a host of ruins and regulations impeding the possibilities to see beyond it, where we observe a world where degradation and discrimination are conventional, purpose and success are defined within the means only of capital, and community is represented only within groups of minorities.

The audience is becoming increasingly oblivious, callous and inherently injudicious to the point of environmental and social obsolescence. The significance of the representation of the situation is vital to the prospect of a better existence. The ambition within my own work is directed by this notion of creating effective social and environmental change using visual activism. In this essay I want to explore the possibilities and responsibilities of the creative collective, specifically photography and its imperative role within our society against the war on defective consumer based cultural blindness and climate change.

Amongst these ruins, climate change poses as one of our greatest threats to our Earth. The ‘scientific evidence for warming of the climate system is unequivocal.’ Non-human photography and digital advancement has enabled scientists to collect various different types of information and evidence on the changing on a global scale. The industrialized system on which our economy is based has depleted our natural resources, increased global and ocean temperatures, shrank ice sheets, glacial retreating, rising sea levels and acidification, declining arctic sea ice, depleted natural resources of food and a number of catastrophic extreme weather events. There are various attempts to engage the spectators in the awareness of this change in climate and the alarming rate it proceeds at. The use of photography is poignant and significant to these attempts and play an integral part of society today. The media in its interiety, through use of informational and social means use images as a form of storytelling, to emphasize more complex narratives. Although, representing climate change is challenging, it is a vast and complex situation stretching across decades with intricate contexts. Although mostly all representations in relation to environmental factors focus on the symptoms and not the causes.

We passively audit a film reel of various climate change representations on a daily basis, there is a colossal cycle of triumphs and failures in the creatives interpretation and ambition to connect us with the reality that is the catastrophic change in the Earth's surface and our responsibility for it. Representations of landscapes have been the primary focus in depicting the change in climate. The images form connection within the spectators sense of place and define a location, which is rationally imaginable. The media will often use depictions of extreme opposing climates; hot as in with sand and sea and cold as in snow and ice. This is an outdated reference in terms of our situation, a sign of a hot climate, with a sign of a cold climate, signifies climate change. However, this juxtaposition can have two different interpretations. It may convey fear in terms of climate extremes, but it also conveys hope for warmer climates, commonly associated with things like holiday destinations. A possible yet improbable means of representation in terms of weather, is focusing on extreme weather and natural disasters. Events such as floods and storms, they hold a possible shocking value and exact scientific reason, which can be seen as although impactful, but also ingestible and conceivable to the consuming spectator. The only dispute with uses of impact, is the over-usage.

Fearmongering has long been a staple of environmental issues, curated by means of the media. For example, images of animals and their abandoned habitat due to its destruction and of skeletonised starving animals who can barely move. These images have been transformed into the symbols and situations we now associate as a direct representation of a far larger issue. I think this can also be related to a range of tactics widely spread across the media as a whole. The problem we seem to face is that while fear is effective, the overuse of such tactics becomes a means of desensitization to the spectacle instead of a successful connection with the spectator. They depict only the effects, its sheer terrifying impact, rather than the cause and root of where and why it has happened. They invoke emotional reactions only, a momentary reaction. Photographs ultimately have become a weapon within mass manipulation and political domination; the result is a society of spectacles and scopic regimes where the individual is converted into both passive spectators and objects of surveillance. This means that spectators are conditioned to identify climate change as a serious problem, but they have trouble recognizing its personal connection to them and therefore direct relevance.

The representations of people in relation to climate change often depend on the connections between issues of global poverty and social justice. This is visualise normally, unfortunately, by people from developing countries only, you could say the western depiction of the east. These are those who have suffered greatest from the impacts of climate change, they have a direct relationship it's effects, but in terms of our perception through image and repetition, have become another sign we associate with climate change. It is these representations, that hold hidden ideologies as well as connections. These types of representations are the fuel in which powers the systematic force of neoliberal ideology, which George Monbiot epitomizes as,

“Far from saving the planet, it distracts us from systemic problems and undermines effective action. The central premise of neoliberalism is that the locus of decision-making can be shifted from democratic government to the individual, working through “the market”. Rather than using politics to change the world for the better, we can do it through our purchases. If neoliberals even half-believed this nonsense, you’d expect them to ensure we were as knowledgeable as possible, so that we could exercise effective decision-making in their great consumer democracy. Instead, the media keeps us in a state of almost total ignorance about the impacts of our consumption.”

Consumption within this context, relates to everything in which we consume through the use of image. It is within these representations that I wish to highlight, and to protest, the social constructs that we inherit and develop over time which act as objectifications of life. These inherent tendencies that we share are vital to identity and diversity but malleable by prejudices and perceptions that can be disguised by traditions that surround our culture. These are filtered through situations, imprinted in us from an early age which conduct our ability to contextualise and perceive situations; we are undeniably and continuously interpreting place as that which is set by boundaries and not 'imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understanding, but where a larger proportion of those relations, experience and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent.' (Massey, 1991) We have become accustomed to an idealized sense of place; a pursuit and fabrication of our own utopian fantasy which more often than none, is driven by a profit mongering industrialized system bound to capitalistic influences of value.

This specifically correlates with Adorno's critique of 'the culture industry', which provides a useful model. Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry is constituted by the complex relationship between ruling ideology, mass media and society and is characterized by the direct control of populations through the manipulation of their desires, this seems to be an ideal framework for the analysis of culture at this time; when the political systems had such a vested interest in the emotional state of the nation, and the threatened population in turn looked to both government and media for reassurance with an urgency rarely seen before or since. 'The Culture Industry's' focal point is the use of media to disable individuals' discernibility for critical analysis through mass-produced distraction, which Adorno describes as 'psychoanalysis in reverse'. He notes that, 'the need which might resist central control has already been suppressed by the control of the individual consciousness.' The crucial notion here is that the culture industry has power over individual consciousness not by overcoming diversity of thought through aggressive ideological control or forceful domination, but by managing in the first place to create a situation in which each 'individual' reproduced as a subject of mass consumption. This homogenization of individual consciousness also creates in each subject an appetite for more of the same control: 'freedom to choose an ideology, since ideology always reflects economic coercion, everywhere proves to be freedom to choose what is always the same.'

As a culture, we naturally abide the ideological circuits that are strategically placed in front of us. These representations motivate, mediate and define our personal perceptions; where and how we define our contextual analytic capability is orientated by the subjective and objective interpretations that we conceptualise through precursory influences and development, those and that which surrounds us, define our landscape of reason and memories which then eventually influences the landscape we perceive externally. Susan Sontag notes that "All memory is individual, unreproducible – it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds. Ideologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts [and] feelings."

If we take, for example, the social construct that is the 'home'; a personalised, constitutional preconception passed down through western ideological generations that is posed as a form of necessary succession within societal acceptance. We create an ideal landscape based on the notion of the home that acts as an individual representation of our desires. In relation to the 'home', it is only within these ideologically influenced constructs that you will find micro-aggressive, fine-print guidelines that propose idealised perfection in the form of favoured family structures and inhabitable infrastructures. Both of which are greatly influenced by difference in environment, culture, heritage and economy but fundamentally constitute inequality and injustice. Although a sense of home and place alike, ideally should have no stigma attached and a sensitivity to these situations act as a valuable social and cultural tool that provides a connection and reformation to heritage and cultures not our own.

Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed, "Photography is distinguished by its immediacy, its authenticity, and the remarkable fact that its eye sees more than the human eye. The camera shows everything." Photography has the capability to expose the facts of life, not just represent as truth, but convey meaning. The spectator assumes photographs as facts, credible witnesses of reality. Although because it mechanically reproduced the situation, this is why it was first considered to be a method of representation that excluded perspective. Although, in reference to its undeniable susceptibility to ideological manipulation, this questions the nature of truth within photography. Perhaps, to call photography truthful, is a questionable means of perception. Art in all forms, manipulates and interpretants, it is the artists means of context that we play witness to, we then find aspects and truth we normally would never consider. We are able to identify a connection with an image based association through the landscape of others to our own.

Historically we were once governed by a direct relationship with the landscape, our immediate existence depended solely on our ability to work with it to form means of survival, be that habitat or sustenance; we witnessed a personal and physical change in our surroundings. Within the modern spectacle, we have advanced systems which mean that instead we are dependent on the industrial means of survival. We are blinded and bound by commodity and it's comfort, unaware of the repercussions it has had, which makes it possible and we are inherently becoming more tedious, less concerned and active as spectators. It is the artist and the situation that don't simply pose as witness to the spectacle, they act through creative power and have the ability to inspire the dormant discourse within the otherwise disconnected individual. Addressing climate change, equates to addressing social and political change, this requires action on a mass scale and not only by the individual. We need to redefine our ability to challenge normative values that currently neoliberal ideologies govern. Collective action is imperative to the spectacle. Collective engagement engages resilience and improves resistance, whilst also supporting affective solidarity that may act as a catalyst for change.

What I wish to proceed to explore through my dissertation, is within the current situation, we have developed a reliance and relationship with the image and the landscape, which is unhealthy, unjust and defective. How do we as creative practitioners redefine the means in which the image is perceived and provide 'an alternative to the dominant culture's view of nature and expose social agenda's in order for us to become conscious of the ideological relationships and historical constructions of place.'(Lippard, 1995) What would be able not just inspire, but pressure neoliberal social and political transformations have put upon communal and artistic life, capture it and turn it into a form of visual activism? What type of

photography, art and activism in the face of capital-induced ecological catastrophe and social disintegration, would create effective change?

‘In a world where degradation and discrimination are conventional, purpose and success are consumed by capital; we are digitally restrained and inherently injudicious to the point of environmental and social obsolescence. How can the role of image, art and activism regenerate and reform and ultimately create change?’

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