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Documentary Photography and visual activism

Tutor: Paul Duerinckx

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Illustration List:

(By order used)

A: *The Falling Soldier* by Robert Capa

Reference: <https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/robert-capa-the-definitive-collection/>

B: *Homes at Night* by Todd Hido

Reference: <http://www.toddhido.com/homes>

C: *Landscapes* by Todd Hido

Reference: <http://www.toddhido.com/landscapes>

D: *The Hotel* by Sophie Calle

Reference: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2021-12-23/in-1982-a-conceptual-artist-masqueraded-as-hotel-maid-decades-later-its-a-gorgeous-book>.

E: *Macro / firefly imagery* by Alberto Ghizzi Panizza

Reference: <https://albertoghizzipanizza.com/en/gallerie/insects/>.

F: *D day and the Omaha beach landings* by Robert Capa

Reference: <https://www.magnumphotos.com/photographer/robert-cap/>

G: *The unseen* by Daniel Mekks

Reference: <https://confluence.gallatin.nyu.edu/context/interdisciplinary-seminar/photography-and-the-unseen#easy-footnote-bottom-5-12785>

How does photography represent the unseen and why does absence make for such a powerful visual tool?

Introduction

To begin, the unseen in photography represents all of which we do and don't see, there are many metaphorical as well as physical meanings for what we could consider as “the unseen”, for example, what is outside the frame of an image or what we don't understand within the environment of an image and its origin. This is something that I believe is very important within photographic and documentary practice especially when considering time and authenticity as a factor and I believe that within every image there is always an element that remains hidden, unseen or left to never be understood to its full potential.

When thinking about the unseen you may think of other similar words or subtopics that relate, such as presence, ambiguity, the implied and the metaphorical. Sometimes the areas that are missing have much greater meaning over areas where we see things are going on and I think this is because as humans we naturally want to learn and gain knowledge over things, and what we don't know stands out more than what we do, this translates over to art in many different ways.

“Wanting is influenced by a variation of deprivation states, the presence for learned incentives for reward, and the anticipated potential for a given stimulus to satisfy one's desire based on past experience.” (Berridge, 1999; Berridge & Robinson, 1998)

This quote by Berridge and Robinson highlights the human need to explore the unknown as well as the subconscious rewards that we reap from discovering our inner nature and the world in which we temporarily exist in. This quote was taken from an assignment by Jordan A. Litman regarding curiosity and the pleasures of learning: wanting and liking new information. Within this assignment he discusses many researchers and theorists such as Berridge and Robinson who explore the biological studies behind finding pleasure and harmony through discovering and utilizing what is unknown.

In this proposal I aim to cover the unseen in relation to photography, how the unseen is represented through imagery and how absence becomes a powerful visual tool for creators to utilize and for viewers to understand and perceive through other bodies of work. I will look at this topic by splitting it into 4 topics: **absence and presence, the everyday overlooked, psychological and subconscious**, and my **summary**.

Absence and Presence

The unseen within photography pushes critical thinking and engagement such as filling in the blank areas of a work that you may personally struggle understanding and initially piecing together. Looking directly at absence and presence within the unseen, some artists and photographers deliberately chip out visual information within their canvas and frame to leave the rest up to viewers to create.

This lack of presence can eventually lead to a much larger orchestrated piece that involves the influence and opinion of many others outside of the creation of it, making it a work for viewers to add their own interpretation of. Some artists and photographers accidentally leave out information behind their work, so it is up to people to assume the validity and authenticity of it.

An example of this is the photo: **The Falling Soldier** by **Robert Capa**.

Within this photo we see the apparent death of a Spanish militiaman taken by the war photographer Robert Capa on black and white film in 1936. It is said to be one of the most debatable pictures in the history of photojournalism and this is all down to what remains ‘unseen’.

Illustration A:



"If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough." (Capa ,1936 - 1940)

I am also adding this quote by Robert Capa which references his ability to put himself where no other photographer would as he's incentivizing that he runs out into the open battlefield essentially for his photos. If this image was staged this comment would make it even more debatable to be considered as legit documentary imagery. However now I cannot help but give all of his other works a second look due to my interpretations of this piece which has created an absence in my conception of his role and intentions.

This is an example of a work where the unseen plays into the very foundation of the photo and its origins. It is up to the viewer to essentially deem it legit or fake and it is put right in front of your face to decide, despite there being so much controversy and mystery around it. I think it is quite hard to believe that a war photographer would fake an image of someone who is serving their country being shot, however I think this makes it even more controversial to have faked it, this is an example of absence allowing the viewer to complete the image.

The part of this image that we don't see is coincidentally the part where we cannot verify and see its legitimacy and that is the backbone to the whole point of the image and his career as a war photographer whose images shouldn't have to be thought about and studied twice over. This is what I believe makes it so controversial, if it was staged, no one would really give the photographer any form of credit despite his work being the very death of another man.

Looking at presence through objects or areas which people and life may have previously been that are instead now represented through empty spaces allows us to add or emphasize presence where there physically isn't. What I am referencing here is presence through absence, this is when abandoned or empty spaces are filled with the life or assumed presence of what / who could be there.

Looking at an artist who utilizes 'the unseen' in this specific way is Todd Hido, a landscape photographer who uses empty space to create an atmosphere and aesthetic that makes you wonder around the strangely surreal environments and inhabitants of the buildings he captures.

Illustration B and C



This work references the unseen through its hidden histories, erasure and curiosity. The photographer Todd Hido quotes “I take photographs of houses at night because I wonder about the families inside them.” (Hido, 2001)

Who would have thought that the photographer takes pictures of houses because of what beauty he may find inside of them as opposed to what they look like on the outside. This is also slightly contradictory to the way he captures and edits these images as they have a cold and damp look to them which initially suggests to us that his feelings behind the images aren't positive.

I think it is also important to mention that where people find absence others find being and existence and this photographer takes people's homes that they disregard and re-represents them in his own light which also references the unseen and how it is always right under our noses as creatives and as viewers. This will be expanded upon in my next subtitle ‘the everyday overlooked’.

The everyday overlooked

Still considering absence and presence but looking mainly at what is overlooked, I want to involve the work of Sophie Calle, another documentary photographer who is also up there on some controversial topics within photography from this project.

Within her project *The Hotel* Sophie Calle most importantly provides presence through absence, (specifically through other people's objects) and she does this in a literal and metaphorical way within her process. Her ability of filling the camera frame with a mystery draw of someone's possessions in a hotel just screams the invasion of personal space, however she brings these people to life through their objects, belongings and valuables and we get an insight into the unseen elements of people and their livelihood that we never would have before from the outside perspective.

Illustration D:



This work is an example of the everyday overlooked, an angle of documentary street photography that makes the mundane visible and meaningful. taking what many don't participate in and using a camera to make this into a sharable experience for others to feel the intrigue and disgust of.

“She uses the negative space where someone has been to discern their outline, like a painter whose sitters have got up and left. The absence of her subjects, as in the vacant rooms of hotel guests, is often literal.” (Rowlands, 2021)

In this quote by Lili Rowlands, she describes the subjects of Sophie Calle almost as people having their portrait painted that have simply sat up and left while she continues her work and pursuit of portrayal. This is an interesting take on the intention behind the project as well as how the piece also has moral support and sense of approval.

The works of Sophie Calle remind me in similar ways to Emmanuel Kant's ideas around epistemology and figuring out 'what' we can experience on a subjective level as opposed to 'how or why'. Her methods of work and purposeful acts of controversy quite highlight the extents to which she is capable and is prepared to go for her to be able to express herself.

The unseen in this case has almost become a glorified stalking session and as viewers all we get is the contents of an individual's cabinets and nothing more. We never get to really understand

the reasoning behind it and through her photography of ‘the hotel’ we are given mystery items with no context of the person who owns them and no context into the photographer’s intentions.

Another example of an artist that explores areas of ‘the everyday overlooked’ is a photographer that ‘reveals’ the unseen through the mundane and boring as he elevates their invisible lives onto a stage that brings out the dreamlike and alien nature of insects under a macro lens. This photographer is Alberto Ghizzi Panizza and he specializes in macro photography and giving the miniature a much greater presence.

Illustration E and F:



What I really like about this work is the natural ethic to discover what something so small really looks like, while also making it an available experience for other people without a macro lens or camera and showing this different scale of life to an audience who aren't able to see it gives you a more anthropomorphized view of the miniature insect world.

Alberto Ghizzi Panizza adjusts the viewer's perception of life and makes it appear larger in a physical and metaphysical way simultaneously. Relating back to my question and how photography represents the unseen, this is another example of how photography can do that, as we can appreciate and confront the very little detail of the smaller things in life that we miss every day.

Bringing the details out of something so overlooked yet something that is also natural and living, like ourselves, makes this project even more real, yet magical at the same time. He creates these personalities and characters from what seem almost invisible to the naked eye, he is essentially using his camera and lens as a tool to reveal what can't be naturally appreciated with the human eye.

This links to *Phenomenology of perception* by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in which he explores how the human body is not just a biological entity but a meaning and a tool of how we can understand and make sense of the world that is around us.

“The world is... the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions. Truth does not inhabit only the inner man, or more accurately, there is no inner man; man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself.” (Merleau , p93, 1962)

This quote refers to the experience and value of discovering the world we are in, with the lives we are given, and finding ways to unveil what we can't see or appreciate. I like this quote and this understanding of it because I value time and experience in which I have in my single chance of life.

The concept around keeping hold of time and experience for others and for myself is something that makes me appreciate a lot of photography because of the journalistic / documentary approach that can be taken and mentioned and the value of history and knowledge through the human eye and how it can be captured for people to try to think beyond in years to come.

Psychological and subconscious

To dive a bit further into the previously discussed artist Robert Capa and ‘the unseen’ I want to focus specifically on the psychological and subconscious. Here is an image taken from D-day in which we see a US soldier in the prone position and battling the waves of the French water, all

whilst lugging around his military equipment. Looking at this image and thinking about the unseen in a new context, I want to explore the idea of ‘exposure’ and how this type of documentary photography represented violent and graphic events to an audience that has never had to witness or contemplate versions of modern violence and war before and in such a palpable way.

Illustration G:

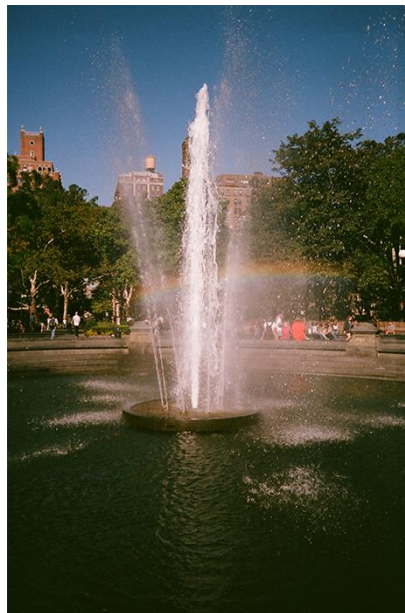


Within images like these we perceive only what we understand, and it is very hard to often fill in areas of a story or frame that is about a topic in which we have not any experience in ourselves. I personally couldn't fathom the experience of the frame in the real time situation and how chaotic that moment truly was. In the example I am using I believe that as viewers of photography we do misunderstand a lot of work because of the unseen and what is past the visual representation.

This is one of the more obvious elements of what we could consider to be ‘unseen’, and I think that some areas of photography that may be perceived as violent, unnecessary, and explicit are

much more meaningful, delicate and poetic when considering experience and intention as a factor.

Illustration H:



In *Photography And The Unseen* by Daniels Mekks he writes “Can a photograph convey the feelings I experienced when I took it?”. (Mekks, 2018)

with this statement he acknowledges and challenges the definition of the photographer's mental state and experiences behind images, and this is interesting to keep in mind when translating and understanding works when trying to directly find what is unseen within the visual outcomes that a camera only provides us with.

He further explores how we essentially individually connect with absence based on our own experiences from life. Daniel almost studies his own emotions and intentions behind his imagery and highlights aspects of his works that are his favorites due to the experiences and emotions behind them rather than what the camera translates for him in the end process.

Daniel Mekks discuss' this when mentioning taking a photo of a violin player and if you can hear the music through their expressions of their eyes being closed through intense moments or when sweat is dripping from the exhaustion and passion played into the instrument.

“What you see is what you see; nothing more. Meaning is where you are. There is no hidden significance, no inner meaning.” (Berger, 1985)

John Bergher pushed the idea and movement around visual culture and how forms of art and documentation are not for living with in the past but a well of conclusions for which we draw in order to act, as well as how vision and understanding are always intertwined. “The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled”. (Bergher ,p7, 1992)

“What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.”

(Barthes, p4, 1980)

Within this quote Roland Barthes highlights photography's ability to capture singular moments that can never be taken again and how they can be taken for the purpose of there being no tangible explanation or way of talking or describing a situation, feeling or event and the photography does the describing. This quote also refers to the nature of experience and how a personal encounter or moment can have great significance through the process of the camera functioning and getting the shot.

This quote also means utilizing the camera as a means of capturing the indescribable and just having the image do the talking. This also allows photographers to disconnect from the image personally and to let the image have its own representation. This is a way that photographers can distance themselves from traumatic events or images that have taken a toll on their mentality and lives.

summary

Within this proposal I have looked at a few different perspectives of ‘the unseen’ within photography and in what instances we can find and pick this out from photos or the missing

identity and background behind them. In my Dissertation I plan to develop on this further looking at the greater philosophical sides of the unseen within photography using a much wider variety of philosophies and previous exploration on the topic including comparing it to additional works.

There are many other areas that I am eager to discuss regarding photography and the unseen, these being discussions around religion and belief, visual culture, deconstruction, media theory and a further expansion of phenomenology.

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