

Student Name: Ollie Stewart

Student number: 2005119

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Tutor's Name: Paul Duerinckx

Research in Practice

Within this dissertation proposal I intend to expound upon the concepts of Identity, Transcendence, and Tableau in the context of photography. The aim of which is to take a 'bottom-up' approach to developing a research question for my dissertation. I shall be discussing G. K. Allum, Martin Stranka and Gregory Crewdson as artists relevant to the three keywords. This essay will discuss each of the key words in turn and attempt to explain selected works of the mentioned artist, touching on themes of feminism, spirituality, Marxism, psychology, mortality, and surrealism. The analysis of the work of these artists will enable a comparison of their respective styles, techniques, and approaches to these themes. Following this, the keywords shall then be analysed in relation to each other. The project will also contribute to the wider discussion on the representation of disability in photography in the arts.

Identity

The first key word is identity. Identity can be defined as "the fact of being, or feeling that you are, a particular type of person, organization, etc.; the qualities that make a

person, organization, etc. different from others:" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). A further description which highlights the psychological interpretation can be described as an individual's perception and understanding of themselves, encompassing their self-concept, self-esteem, and self-identity. It involves a complex interplay between personal and social factors, including personality traits, values, beliefs, roles, and affiliations. Identity formation is a dynamic process that occurs throughout the lifespan and can be influenced by various internal and external factors, such as personal experiences, social interactions, cultural norms, and societal expectations (A. S. Reber, Rhianon Allen, and Emily S. Reber, 2009).

Identity is defined by a person's characteristics such as race, sexuality, gender, disability and political or religious beliefs. The traits that make up our identity connect to an individual's value system (Courses, 2017). Whilst identity is subjective and personal to the individual, it is largely comprised of the "memories, relationships, and values" of a person which creates the sense of self (Psychology Today, 2023). The characteristics that make up a person's identity are often explored within art to question norms, values, and stereotypes. Additionally, they allow artists to delve deep into the connections between facets of identity (Tate, 2023a). According to Tate, (2023) artists often explore and create artwork related to cultural identity using theories that emerged in the mid-20th century. These theories, influenced by feminism and Marxism, help artists understand and express the complexities of how culture shapes our sense of identity. Feminist perspectives focus on gender norms and power dynamics, while Marxist perspectives analyse the influence of social class and economic systems. Through their art, artists aim to challenge societal norms, shed light on inequalities, and provoke deeper reflections on cultural identity.

Through integrating feminist and Marxist theories into their artistic practices, artists delve into nuanced examinations of cultural identity. Their works challenge established norms, unveil power structures, and offer alternative narratives, enriching scholarly discussions and expanding our comprehension of the intricate complexities surrounding cultural identity in the modern world. An example of such a study might be "The Second Sex". This is a seminal piece of work by de Beauvoir and is considered a foundational text in feminist theory. It critically examined the historical and cultural construction of womanhood, discussing women's oppression and their struggle for autonomy and self-definition (Simone de Beauvoir, 1949). Tate also suggests that cultural identity constructs reflect a state of who we are as individuals, as a society, and as a nation. This questions stereotypes and conventions whilst exploring attributes such as gender, sexuality, race, nationality and heritage (Tate, 2023a). Artists who have explored identity include G. K. Allum and Liz Johnson Artur.

G. K. Allum is an artist whose work is associated with identity. One facet of modern society is depersonalisation and lack of identity. Allum explores this theme in his work. A striking example of this is *The Francesca Woodman Conspiracy* (See figure 1). The subject of the photo occupies a position of importance in the



Figure 1; *The Francesca Woodman Conspiracy*

frame, however, there is very little the viewer can glean of her identity from this shot. The emphasis instead is on her movement and attire. The whiteness of her dress and lack of focus contrasts with the clarity of the grimy weightiness of the walls and

floor behind and under her. The viewer is left with the sense of the ephemeral nature of identity. One does not know her full identity, but some might argue that you can have glimpses of it such as she might be a dancer or a woman. However, these are not set in stone and her identity still remains a mystery.

Another artist that explores identity in photography is Liz Johnson Artur. Her series on the Black Lives Matter Protests of 2020, *Time don't run here* (See figure 2), focuses on identity not of the subject, but of the viewer.

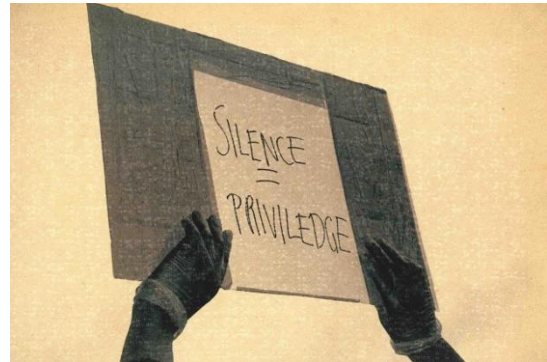


Figure 2; *Time don't run here*

For her, it is important for individuals to see themselves represented visually in a positive light, to celebrate culture and resistance to the hegemonic forces of society (Liz Johnson Artur, 2022).

Transcendence

Transcendence has many different meanings associated with it but for the purpose of simplicity, this essay will be focusing on transcendence as something dreamlike or not on this plane of reality.

Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than as means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos (Maslow, 1969).

Transcendence is an alternate state whether physical or mental and this can affect the way a person relates to others. Originating from the Latin word 'trans' it literally translates as beyond or to climb; moving from the plane of reality to an alternate understanding (*Transcendence - Definition, Meaning & Synonyms*, 2023). Maslow describes this as a, “mystical experience, Mystic fusion, either with another person or with the whole cosmos or with anything in between... mystical experience as classically described by the religious mystics in the various religious literatures”(Maslow, 1969). Within this understanding Maslow discusses transcendence in terms of mysticism and spirituality, key concepts highlighted in the image called *Believe* by

Martin Stranka (See figure 3). The photo depicts a whale floating in the sky which is out of focus with the background. The



Figure 3; *Believe*

background is dark and heavy, arguably made by humans. It's complex and concrete. The whale however seems light and ethereal, the lines are simple and clean, even the shadow is washed out. The posture and curve of the body are relaxed and graceful, implying the whale is swimming in the sky. This weightlessness of the whale separates it entirely from the ordinary world of the cityscape below it.

Stranka's image touches on Maslow's Mysticism through creating an image where the whale transcends the urban jungle creating an altered state of consciousness. "I could describe my "art world" like a space where I deny the laws of physics and erase the border between conciseness and dreaming" (Stranka, 2013). For Stranka

his artworld defies limitations just as a mystical experience does for Maslow. The whale circumvents the natural laws of gravity for a mammal of that size, removing the boundaries between reality and dreaming, stepping into the realm of transcendence and mysticism.

Stranka's image has a clear starting and end point which provides a stable composition for the viewer. The starting point is the darkest section, in the bottom left-hand corner of the image moving across to where the person is standing. The line coming diagonally up from the right side is also a valid starting point, however. The end point could then be the top right-hand corner as the whale is pointing in this direction as well as it being the lightest area of the image, so this is the direction the eye naturally follows.

Whilst the composition doesn't necessarily affect the narrative it impacts heavily on how the person views the photo. As the whale is out of focus the eye is automatically drawn to the section in focus, the man and arguably the viewer's interpretation is affected by this; one starts to question what the man is thinking and why he is looking. The image reflects a calmness which may not be in-line with seeing a whale flying, a spectacle out of the ordinary, which in normal circumstances may cause panic. The whale is also out of water, or is the viewer supposed to presume the whole image to be under water? The image itself transcends to a new plain of reality, taking the viewer along with it. Stranka says this "I have been always amazed by the connection between humanity and nature in the most emotive and pure way. I work a

lot with wild animals assymobls [sic] of fragility, ephemerality, and the power of nature itself" (Stranka, no date).

Tableau

Tableau is used to describe a painting or photograph in which characters are arranged for picturesque or dramatic effect and appear absorbed and completely unaware of the existence of the viewer (Tate, 2023b). Tableau photography is a complex art form that can both evoke strong emotional responses and be emotionally detached. At its best tableau photography can capture the essence of the moment which can create powerful emotions and tell a story. However, the technique used, the careful constructed sets and scenes can make the photograph feel artificial and emotionless. Some may argue that this retracts from the story.

Gregory Crewdson depicts, in his image, *Untitled* within the *Twilight* series (see figure 4) a woman lying on top of some sort of liquid. Her environment is that of a typical suburban family home that resonates with the viewer. She lies, half submerged in what appears to be



Figure 4; *Untitled*

dark, still water, in the middle of a neat room that looks like it could belong to an elderly couple or a middle-class family. The room looks well cared for and the epitome of ordinary everyday material life. The water or other liquid reflects parts of the room above it, thereby creating a mirror image reflection of the room. The figure

herself is still, possibly dead with her eyes open and face looking upwards and out of the image, perhaps trying to find an alternative solution to her predicament, perhaps not focused on her situation at all.

The woman is in the centre of the room with the staircase pointing at her. This is a great composition technique. As your eyes follow the stairs, first diagonally down from the upper left, then straight out towards the foreground, they are naturally guided towards the subject. In the same way the reflection of the windows in the door in the bottom left corner provide a nice exit point for you to stop looking. This is a technique regularly used by artists to form a solid composition; the concept is that there is a starting point and an ending point to an image and this makes it easier for the viewer to understand (*Exiting out of a Composition*, 2023).

As you keep looking you notice that diagonals are a theme in this image, with the stairs, the pictures above them and the windows in the door to the far right of the room. The woman is dressed in white which adds to her pale complexion and gives the figure an ethereal feeling. Whilst white can symbolise purity and innocence, white technically is not a colour at all, rather the absence of colour. "White is defined as the lightest colour and is achromatic, meaning that it has no hue" (Kendra Cherry, 2023). It could be argued that Crewdson dressed the figure in white to convey the absence of life in the woman. This is further supported by her blank expression as she stares lifeless at the ceiling. Crewdson says about his work: "What I am interested in is that moment of transcendence, where one is transported into another place, into a perfect, still world" (Brisbane, 2013). This statement seems to describe this work

very well. In the midst of prosaic reality (the room), upon which intrudes the extraordinary, the wild, the unknown (the water), a woman exists in a state in which she doesn't engage with the ordinary. Supported by the wild still water she gazes beyond the bounds, either in death or trance. The image expresses a profound sense of stillness. There is no ripple on the water, the woman is motionless and lying with no tension at all in her muscles. There is nothing moving in the room.

Crewdson's image is surrealist in nature (David, 2021), bordering between reality and a dreamworld. Angelo Accardi describes surrealism as

strange images or bizarre juxtapositions, unconsciousness as a valid reality, dream-like artwork or symbolic images, automatism techniques to create random effects, distorted figures or biomorphic shapes, depiction of perverse sexuality, and chance or spontaneity ('What Is Surreal Art Definition?', 2015).

Going by Accardi's definition, this makes Crewdson's image more than worthy to be called a surrealist photograph for its unconsciousness as a valid reality, dream-like and use of symbolic imagery within the photograph.

One could argue that surrealism within photography can be more challenging than surrealism within another art medium such as painting. A painter can paint directly from their imagination filling the page with what they have thought up themselves whilst a photographer only has what's available to photograph, using various techniques such as multiple exposure, photomontage and blurring areas like the face (*Surrealist photography* · V&A, 2023). Photoshop and other photo manipulation software also serve as a very useful tool for surrealist photographers.

The key words, identity, transcendence, and tableau are areas that have influenced me in the past, or I am interested in exploring in the future. In tableau, the subject is arranged thoughtfully in a picturesque or dramatic way (Tate, 2023b). As the subject's identity was dictated by the artist, one could argue that their identity is not authentic. Transcendence is beyond physical needs and being part of something bigger than yourself (Tate, 2023b). Establishing meaningful relationships with others can help overcome societal dictations of difference. Disability is not defined by you but how society sees you for example a wheelchair user is not defined by them being in a wheelchair, it is the lack of ramps or access to places that defines them.

For my dissertation I would like to explore how identity, transcendence and tableau can be used to portray disability through a social model and an individual's relationship to it. How can one's disability be affected by their attitude towards it? How are positive and negative perceptions of disability portrayed? Can non-disabled people authentically capture the experiences of disabled people without being voyeuristic? How are different disabilities (for example physical, cognitive, etc.) captured in photography? The question I have chosen to explore in my dissertation is *How can ableism be challenged through the medium of photography?*

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Fig 2: Artur, L. J. (2020) Time don't run here. Available at: <https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/14086/liz-johnson-artur-s-blistering-new-book-documents-london-s-blm-protests> (Accessed 27 April 2023)

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