

Helsinki Photomedia 2024: Contact of Models

Extended Abstract by Dr Mark Aitken

Presence of Absence: The Silence of Photography and the Landscape of Trauma

Roger Fenton's photograph from the Crimean War of cannonballs in 'The Valley of the Shadow of Death', (1855) is an early example of trauma and silence in photography. Fenton couldn't photograph movement with his cumbersome equipment and the stillness of haunted killing fields set a precedent that continues to this day. I want to ask what interactions between memory, photography and silence might offer insight into how trauma permeates our lives. While doing so, I'll reference examples of work by artists and my own.

Ulrich Baer draws parallels between the 'blocking' of memory after trauma and photographic memory. Traumatic memory originates from extraordinary temporal 'ruptures' just as a photo does. However, the relationship between photography and trauma is fraught with possibility of absent trauma becoming present again – re-traumatization - derived from what Cathy Caruth described as a, 'crisis in representation, of history and truth and of narrative time'.

Photography often sensationalises trauma to create a 'shocking' spectacle while purportedly advocating change to the status quo. South African war photographer Greg Marinovich described the colossal deficit in his approach as, '... the empathy that makes us human, is lost every time the shutter is released'. The process determines what's in front *and* behind the camera being traumatised. Kevin Carter, a colleague of Marinovich took a photo of a malnourished African child with a vulture lurking nearby in Sudan in 1993. The photo won the Pulitzer Prize but a year later Carter committed suicide due to PTSD.

However, photography and traumatic memory has relationships other than the sensational. Soumya Sankar Bose's photo series 'Where the birds never sing' (2020) is about a massacre in India in 1979. Employing survivors, the works poetically reconstruct traumatic memories utilising re-enactment, folklore, oral accounts and fiction in locations other than the actual (now inaccessible) site. Santasil Mallik describes the participants - 'not as victims but as storytellers'. Here, trauma reverberates in photography as dialogue with memory that's opened up through performative accounts by survivors. The investment of Bose and collaborators in creating a presence of absence from traumatic memory offers refuge from alienation for them. We're not witnessing the spectacle of trauma but a reworking of it. The artist and collaborators seek to understand traumatic memory on their own terms whereby they 'actively participate in its transformation'. There is possibility to negotiate representation of trauma beyond the stasis of Caruth's crisis.

Taryn Simon's portrait series 'The Innocents' (2003) is about the complexities of wrongful convictions. It also questions our assumptions about what sort of memories might be evident in a photograph. Men and women are set in locations they were falsely accused of committing violent crimes in. Some of them spent decades in prison before DNA testing proved their innocence. Simon and the participant's intentions are clear as they re-contextualise their identities through photographs. We see a photographic reconstruction of an event that never took place. A fiction that led to their imprisonment. It's a case of using a false memory to set the record straight.

The psychological and emotional 'landscape of trauma' is explored in a 'traumatised landscape' by these artists. Anthropologist Tim Ingold argues that 'landscape' is a cultural phenomenon involving active participation.

... to perceive the landscape is... to carry out an act of remembrance... engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past.

Composer John Cage asked, 'What right do I have to be in the woods if the woods are not in me? Landscape is a dwelling we inhabit that also dwells psychologically and emotionally within us.'

My work is developed through ongoing relationships with people within agreed frameworks, influenced by Edouard Glissant's 'Poetics of Relation' suggesting that, 'Every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other'. Research for my 'Presence of Absence' series started in April 2022 in Finnish Lapland, where indigenous Sámi are well known for ancient traditions associated with specific natural landscapes defined as 'sacred places'. Lapland is on the frontline of climate change and consequent mineral exploitation. The landscape overflows with traumatic memories but I experienced reluctance from Sámi to engage with research. As the only indigenous people in Europe, they are the most studied and there is now an understandable self-reflexive 'decolonial' impetus.

Anthropologist Tiina Aikas describes Sami sacred places as simultaneously located between the worlds yet not apart from this world. I see a parallel with photography as a liminal medium and consider what a non-indigenous and more diverse secular 'sacred place' might be and how it may be located in landscape and memory. I've asked the question: what memories do you take into landscapes and how do these landscapes affect memories? The photos serve as a conduit for traumatic memories. They offer catharsis for the people in them and are a consummation of our working relationship. Many but not all participants are grieving loss of some kind.

Victor Burgin insisted every photographic frame being,

...invaded by language in the very moment it is looked at: in memory, in association, snatches of words and images continually intermingle and exchange one for the other.

Burkin's omits the possibility of silence that might develop from looking at a photograph after words and associations have proved inadequate. This silence may result from an admission of 'not knowing': an agnosticism at least partly defined by linguistic limitations when approaching uncertain memory. Silence need not be defined as something missing. It may be that silence is a non-linguistic form to be received or 'read' differently. "What cannot be spoken" constitutes a determined linguistic presence. Wittgenstein concluded, 'Through silence the absolute limits of language are reached.' Silence connotes ineffability. As Susan Sontag said in 'Against Interpretation'...

'Even the simplest sensation is, in its totality, indescribable. Every work of art, therefore, needs to be understood not only as something rendered, but also as a certain handling of the ineffable.'

(971 words)

Keywords

Silence, trauma, memory, landscape, photography