

Human to human. Tact as an aesthetic category in the photobooks by Bruce Gilden and Andrzej Steinbach

In an early definition of tact, Erving Goffman characteristically understands "face-work" as "traffic rules" – a collective skillset that preserves not only an individual's dignity in a social setting but also that of others.¹ In the context of my two case studies, tact transforms into dexterity when the observer considers the demands of mutual "face-work" while engaging with photobooks.²

The interplay of proximity and distance, which holds significance both phenomenologically within the aesthetic object and in the context of tact, manifests in photobooks through their material conditions. Familiarity with these books reveals that this dynamic unfolds in diverse ways: In Bruce Gilden's book *A Beautiful Catastrophe* (2005), public space is thematized as a dehumanized place full of humans, thus reorganizing an experience that cannot only be had on the sidewalks of New York. In my second example, tact has a different connotation. *Figure I, Figure II* from Andrzej Steinbach (2015) forms an intersection between what a person chooses to be and what the society chooses to allow her/him to be.

In my lecture, tact as a phenomenon of the in-between is examined as three aspects of the intermediate: Presence, identification and rhythm. Under the heading *Presence*, I discuss "undoing presence" – deliberately withdrawn presence in public space. This term addresses the problem that co-present bodies want to interact with each other and the phenomenon that many bodies in confined spaces tend to overwhelm sensory perception. In the *Identification* section, the books examined deal with the ambivalence between a constant figure and its changeable appearance. This irritates the viewer and his/her interpersonal osmosis, fingertip sensitivity or tact: the established horizon of expectation, which plays a

1 Erving Goffman, On face-work: An analysis of ritual elements in social interaction. In: Interaction ritual: essays on face-to-face interaction, Aldine Publishing Company: Chicago 1967, pp. 5–45, p. 12.

2 Here I see overlaps with Kaja Silverman's approach, which sees photography as a vehicle for placing us in a relationship of analogy with the world, "and through which we learn to think analogically" and "assume our place within it because it, too, is analogical." Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy*, Stanford University Press: Stanford 2015, p. 15.

decisive role in tact, is missing. And in the *Rhythm* section I deal with the question of appropriateness: the visible staging of *Figure I*, *Figure II*, allows invisibility to neither the camera nor the photographer. The naturalized camera of the street, which can only be half believed in Gilden's work, has been completely abandoned in Steinbach's work. The thesis of this sub-chapter is therefore that tact and tactfulness are not solely mental and spoken acts, but also somatic ones.

Methodologically, I borrow ideas from Alva Noë, whose concept of "strangeness"³ based on phenomenology plays a role in both works, approaches from sociology – in addition to Goffmann, Stefan Hirschauer's concept of "undoing presence"⁴ – and with Juliane Vogels "appearance protocols"⁵ elements of theater studies to make the in-between of the performances describable.

My thesis posits that encounters with individuals unfold within the pages of photobooks, and the aesthetic manifestation of tactful behavior occurs as the pages are turned. The books actively engage with social practices, presenting the viewer with a reimagined everyday reality that demands the application of these skills in diverse ways: In Gilden's work, we become almost painfully aware of the lack of tact and thus of the negotiation process that a public space like the street always requires. Conversely, Steinbach's work introduces figures that resist easy identification, necessitating a flexible response beyond conventional routines. The images challenge viewers to employ an adaptive framework, prompting a reconsideration of established reaction patterns in the face of ambiguity. Or to put it briefly: tact can be considered an aesthetic category in these photobooks.

3 See Alva Noë, *Strange Tools. Art and Human Nature*, Hill and Wang: New York 2015.

4 Stefan Hirschauer, *On Doing Being a Stranger: The Practical Constitution of Civil Inattention*, in: *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 35/1 (2005), pp. 41–67, p. 59.

5 See Juliane Vogel, *Aus dem Grund. Auftrittprotokolle zwischen Racine und Nietzsche* [For the reason. Appearance protocols between Racine and Nietzsche], Fink: Paderborn 2018.