

What Do Photographs Really Want?

Artistic re-enactment practices within photography and research form the focus of this study and my own going Doctoral Research. It proposes artistic re-enactment not as a literal re-presentation or nostalgic reconstruction, but as a method of creative and critical iteration. Through its performed repetitive difference, re-enactment can elicit transformative ways of reaching back to reinterpret the past and to critique the present. In doing so, it can also function as a tool for fugitivity, enabling the imagining of alternative, or perhaps even better, futures.

The practice of performing visual iteration for the camera has been a pervasive visual strategy since the invention of the photographic medium. For example, early war photographers such as Roger Fenton and Mathew Brady employed visual iteration by using soldiers and other participants in the conflicts as actors to re-enact scenes they had witnessed. A necessary technique because the photographic equipment of the time was too slow and cumbersome to capture events in real time. Re-enactment was also central to early photographic-art movements such as Pictorialism, where theatrical re-creations of biblical and mythical scenes served as a primary visual focus. For instance, Fred Holland Day embodied the role of Jesus Christ in his re-enactment of the crucifixion. After a relative lull during Modernism, re-enactment re-emerged in postmodernist photographic practices. Feminist photographers, such as Jo Spence, employed re-enactments of family-album images to critique representations of identity and the construction of social roles. Today, contemporary photographers such as Catherine Opie, Samuel Fosso, and Tarrah Krajnak continue to employ artistic re-enactment, remixing historical imagery with contemporary identities to foreground perspectives that were previously marginalized or deliberately overlooked.

Up to now, all the previous examples would have been discussed as instances of staged photography or tableaux, and this assessment would still be valid. However, this research aims to extend understanding beyond how these images were made or what they mean, to instead explore how they function and what they do. Achieving this requires a theoretical shift from a representational framework to a performative one.

In my last article, *Re-enactment as Research: A Monologue*, I defined my theoretical understanding of artistic re-enactment and proposed it as both a photographic and research methodology. I identified the praxis of artistic re-enactment as the tension between performance and performativity, an interplay that allows both self (the re-enactor) and object (the past) to be present. The performance allows the past to be embodied, 'moulding itself to body of the performer and becoming visible via their unique performativity. The performer's body becomes a synergetic space, both subject: the re-enactor, and a material object: the past image. A performance of a subjective object' (forthcoming).

My theoretical framing in this previous article, in which I sought to understand artistic re-enactment as images that not only represent reality but also alter the reality they depict, was itself re-enacting Barbara Bolt's performative paradigm (2016). Bolt's understanding of performativity is derived from a philosophy and understanding of language, such as J.L. Austin's performative utterances (1975). However, in making a direct comparison with performative utterances, I realized that I might be limiting the understanding of the photographic image by treating it primarily as a form of language. Forcing the photographic image into systems based mainly on language risks overlooking aspects of it that cannot be reduced to signs or discourse and risks discrediting it as a medium in its own right, in need of its own philosophies.

"Pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language," proclaimed W. J. T. Mitchell in his seminal text *What Do Pictures Really Want?* In this work, Mitchell invites us to question pictures about their desires rather than viewing them solely as vehicles of meaning or as instruments of power and change (1996, p.82). This implies my inquiries thus far have been impolite, that before we can fully understand the role of re-enactment within a photograph, we need to adopt a more reciprocal and relational perspective by asking: *what does a photograph want?*

So far in my research, I have focused on the intentional re-enactments staged by photographers behind the camera. However, what if the photograph itself has

intentions? What if the photograph itself has an inherent desire to return? What if the photograph itself has the agency to re-enact? What if a photograph has its own regimes of historicity, to use François Hartog's terminology (2015), which shape the perception and organisation of historical time?

As Mitchell points out, it may be the case that images do not inherently know what they want: "Like people, pictures do not know what they want; they have to be helped to recollect it through a dialogue with others"(1996, p.81) Perhaps photography, now in this time of networks, global circulations, and new media realities, needs such support in recollecting its own subjectivities and its own autonomies, its own politics.

Perhaps a renewed phenomenological perspective on the photographic medium's own intention within temporal anachronism would further advance the study of artistic re-enactment. A philosophy that acknowledges our Contemporary Conditions (Artistic practice, 2024) and applies performativity theory in an expansive rather than adaptive way could elicit a more image-centric understanding of photography's role in imagining the future differently.

Or perhaps photographs just simply want to be asked the question: what is it that you really want?

Keywords

Re-enactment, Performativity, Desire, Contemporary Conditions, Historicity.

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