

The Grand Absence

A visualization

The day after my graduate show opened, my father rang me up from abroad. He asked what the opening had been like and how the exhibition was going.

'It's a shame you can't be here', was the first thing I said.

'I am trying to visualize it from here. I was hoping you'd be able to feed me a few details', he said cheerfully.

To visualize something. I was instantly reminded of his last article, which was coincidentally about this same subject. My father contended that 'to visualize something' actually means to place yourself in the role that you would have had in the situation you are trying to visualize; not just a simple, cerebral visualization or projection, but an actual 'being present' or role play, acting if you will, with the only limitation that you cannot be physically present. With age comes the skill to keep this to oneself; the subtle act of inner visualization.

I didn't dare to tell my father that this conversation, during which he was making a visualization of my situation, was a perfect opportunity to test out his assertion. Was he really acting as if he was with me, inside himself? After we had spoken, would he no longer have the need to come? If he only knew how much his presence would have meant to me, whether it was mental or physical.

I heard my father asking from the other side of the line if I could tell him about the last few days.

'I had a conversation with Uncle Robert', was the only thing I could think of.

'So I heard. And?'

'He didn't understand any of it.'

'It depends of course on whether you are willing to explain your work and what tone of voice you use. From what I heard, you were rather condescending.'

'Me? That was him, more likely. He kept repeating, "So you've been studying for four years to become an *artist*?" He really wondered what I'd been doing all that time.'

It was quiet on the other end of the line. No sign of instant understanding, as I had perhaps secretly hoped for.

'He just didn't *look*', I went on. 'Or, he looked, but he didn't see. He considered my work from another level.'

'On what level did he look, you think?'

'He was looking for something beautiful. And found nothing, of course.'

'He didn't think your photos are beautiful?'

'They *aren't*.'

Again, silence.

'No', I asserted firmly, in order not to sound insecure. 'It has no function. Beauty has nothing to do with what I'm trying to say.'

'What are you trying to say then?'

This is the Great Inescapable Question that nearly all artists are asked with every endeavour. We know the question inside and out, in all its forms; we know the precise moment at which it will be asked, can feel it coming flawlessly; we know the tone in which it will be asked, the look that accompanies the words. The only thing the artist doesn't know is the clever retort.

Someone once said that the major difference between art and science consists in

the ability to 'vulgarize' the findings of a scientific or artistic study. He explained that scientific findings (a theorem, a solution) can be simplified so that everyone or nearly everyone can understand them, but a work of art exists by the grace of its impossibility of simplification. Doing so would destroy the essence of what makes it art.¹

Perhaps this is the reason artists don't have a clever answer, and why, with those artists that do have one ready, the answer is usually much more interesting than their artwork. Perhaps it is also the reason people become artists: because they already suspect they are more likely to find their answers in a form other than the logical and verbal.

'What are you trying to say?' Everyone would ask this question, because they want to feel involved as soon as they are able to see what you have made. One of the first things you learn is that you can't exclude anyone; you can't simply say: you are not part of my audience. The louder you say that, the more people want to belong to that group, and the more adamantly they'll insist that they do.

Strangely enough, few people have this agility when it comes to the ability to empathize with your work.

'What are you trying to say then?'

'That's the same thing Uncle Robert said.'

'It is a totally valid and obvious question.'

'Hasn't it already occurred to you that the best answer I can give to that question is found in my work? That I didn't study photography to learn how to talk?'

My father chuckled. 'I know you. You're evading the question. I know that you have absolutely no difficulty expressing yourself.'

'Then perhaps the question is too abstract. As if I'm working on a microscopic level the whole time and suddenly I'm asked to give an overview of my work, to look up from the eyepiece and to place an infinite number of details, like a completed mosaic, within an all-encompassing framework of life and to survey the relationships with all sorts of vital questions at a single glance.'

'Photos are so concrete, son', said my father, still with the same derision in his voice. 'Why can't you be, too? All the photos that pass by in my visualization – also yours – have that concreteness. Describe a photo you've taken.'

'For example, I've made a photograph about objectivity —'

'No', he interrupted me, 'Describe what that photo looks like. What would I see if I stood in front of that photo?'

'A square. From a bird's eye-view perspective.'

'What kind of square?'

'A square in a city. The houses are neither modern nor old-fashioned. There is a small public garden, and some parked cars that don't really stand out.'

'People?'

'No people.'

'Okay. I can see it. Why a square? Why that square?'

'I think it's easy to get an overview of a square. That's a characteristic of squares. Why that particular square ... no idea. I didn't know what else to photograph. I'm not concerned with specific features and certainly not with showing something extraordinary. What matters to me is the way of looking. The bird's eye-view perspective is like the omniscient narrator. The photo as omniscience. Because it

¹ Words to this effect were spoken by Jean-Baptiste Joly, director of Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, during the *Artistic Research* symposium in April 2003 in Maison Descartes in Amsterdam

looks out over everything, a certain objectivity prevails, but still, only one thing can be viewed at a time. A choice has to be made, such as by our own gaze.'

'How do I know it's about that when I'm standing in front of the photo?'

'I don't know. But that's how art is, Dad. The most you can do is provide a small hint, for instance by hanging the photo with other photos that have the same characteristics or just the opposite, with very different ones, by varying the presentation. If need be, you can make up a title.'

When I started this graduation project, I wrote in my notebook: 'A problem of art photography is that before it can communicate clearly, it first must take a position on theoretical questions about photography itself.'

To nuance that position a bit, afterwards I wrote the following paragraphs:

'Often it determines its place in this theoretical spectrum with the help of style. The process connected to this is a question of convention. A photo has a certain style, is associated with a movement in art history or on the contrary, with ignoring the question marks of its own origin, and only then does it communicate clearly. These steps are performed in a matter of seconds.

It can be seen immediately that a 4 x 6 inch photo of a sunset in no way refers to a theoretical photographic concept. With a large photo in a museological context, however, in which the photographer has not chosen a traditional, aesthetic form, the somewhat practiced viewer looks for signs of reference to a specific type of photography, in which this concept is significant.

You could express this more simply with the following question: if it's not about showing something with an immediately clear meaning (aesthetically, historically, socially, etc.), what is it about?

The first reaction of the viewer is to explore choices of style and form, which provide insight into the way the photographer approached his or her subject. If the relationship of the photographer to the subject is not made clear through style or form, a communication problem ensues. In other words, if an art photographer must include the implicit message 'this is art' in his or her photo – which is generally expected by the viewer – he or she *cannot* make a small colour photograph of a sunset, no matter what the intention. This restriction is probably not limited to this specific case, and if one doesn't comply with it, it prompts protest.

Allan Sekula's photo series *Fish Story* was shown in 2002 at Documenta11, hanging in a central location and a large number of spaces. I and the other people with whom I viewed the photos couldn't help but feel a form of indignation about the way the photos had been taken and presented. They looked like amateur photos ('badly' printed, incomprehensible or – conversely – too obvious framing) and were also presented like that (different-coloured mats, framed in reflective glass, hung at slightly varying heights, two photos taken nearly simultaneously hanging next to each other).

After I got home, those facts started me thinking: why should a Documenta participant, a renowned artist and writer of critically acclaimed essays on photo theory, choose this form of presentation? It began to dawn on me that Sekula had very consciously chosen this style and presentation. This suspicion was confirmed when I read the following passage in one of his essays: 'The ills of photography are the ills of aestheticism. Aestheticism must be superseded, in its entirety, for a meaningful art, of any sort, to emerge'.²

² Allan Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning'
In: *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin
Macmillan, 1982
© Nickel van Duijvenboden, 2003
Translation by Iris Maher, 2009

It is clear that Sekula is consciously trying to change the conventional meaning mechanism of photography and with this knowledge, that he views aesthetics as an obstacle. In first viewing the presentation, I and other experienced viewers were not able to let go of the conventional way of viewing. The context (which kept me thinking about it once I got home) and what I read more or less cured me of these conventions.

And yet, what was hanging at Documenta did not communicate with me, because there was a discrepancy between the language of form and the content. More so, I didn't even see the content; at least, I can't remember it.'

To see nothing. This eclipse-like sensation must have been what my uncle felt. But is it then really true that art photography either presupposes prior knowledge by the viewer or requires a verbal explanation? Which in fact, if you think about it, amounts to the same thing, namely that art can only be understood with a textbook.

If that is true and, by being an artist, I have accepted this, then I could ask myself whether I make art with my father in mind as a potential viewer. To be honest, I can't imagine who else I make art for, other than for people such as he, who could understand it if they put their minds to it, and also for him personally, because he's my father and I want nothing more than for him to be proud of me.

'I can visualize something from what you're saying', says my father in reply to my explanation about generating meaning with a context. 'But what is it that you want to make clear by placing the photos next to each other? What do they have in common?'

'I think that they are all more about photography itself than the subject. At least, that's what I hope.'

Sooner or later, I imagine, a photographer will revolt against his camera. At one point he learned to operate it, then became fused with it, at its mercy [...] – and suddenly the point has been reached that the most natural has become unbearable, because the camera is always aimed at something, it can never look the other way, through the eye, into consciousness.³

I am living proof that this impression by Dutch author Willem Jan Otten is accurate. That quality of photography he calls 'the most natural', I keep running into it. Now, too, in this very conversation.

'It would be best if I had no subject at all', I continued. 'That's also the reason I don't know why I photographed that particular square. The square doesn't interest me, and the way I photographed it probably ensured that it wouldn't be interesting to you and Uncle Robert either. That is precisely what's good about it. It's a clue to something else, because there has to be a reason, after all, why that photo was made. Only, people are so used to photography being about beauty and the extraordinary that they give up as soon as there's no evidence of that.'

'I don't know whether I'd give up', my father sounds surprisingly earnest, as if he is talking to himself. 'Probably. Because where's the legitimacy of the image if it doesn't serve as the convincing packaging of an idea?'

³ Willem Jan Otten, 'The Art of Being There'
In: *The Fourth Wall; Photography as Theatre*
Fragment, Amsterdam 1991
© Nickel van Duijvenboden, 2003
Translation by Iris Maher, 2009

'I think that's a dangerous statement. It's aesthetic packaging that keeps me looking at photos from the third world, completely without any feeling, because its beauty prevents me from seeing what's going on. Beauty is a disguise. I may sound like a Calvinist, but aesthetics causes a split between what there is to see and what I mean. It would be the same as that article that you gave me a while ago, but then in a popular science style.'

'We're discussing an *image*, boy. That always has a pronounced aesthetic value, because the viewer has a first impression. Text doesn't work that way.'

'You're right. But if my images were too dazzling to the eye people would walk right by. One of the tasks of art, in my eyes, is to be something other than entertainment, because what would remain if people could just absorb my images indiscriminately and walk on by without asking themselves even one single question?'

'Maybe then I should ask: why do I have to see the images, now that you've explained this to me? What do the photos add?'

'Exactly what I just said. You're asking me, not the other way round. In the photos, I ask the question and you are challenged to answer for yourself. It should be a learning process.'

'See, that doesn't convince me. What makes me doubt the way you use photography is that you don't want to do anything with it that can only be done with photography – it could be done with words as well. Besides, if it's not about beauty, not about the exceptional and if the whole subject doesn't even interest you, what then are the criteria for quality? Why should you choose one picture over the other if one says just as much about photography as the other?'

'Those could be my words.'

'But they are not the words of a photographer. I keep wondering what effect your thinking has on the act of making a photograph.'

'Now, that is the only thing I still haven't been able to reconcile', I contemplated. 'My thoughts on photography can never go beyond the act itself. It doesn't seem to apply once I stand there with the camera in front of my... *subject matter*. I'm not able to transfer what we are talking about to the images.'

'If everything you've just told me is in fact what you want to convey, why would I still need to come and see the photos?'

'Well, it is still intriguing, at the very least, that we have only been able to have this conversation because we both *know* that the photos are actually hanging there. That in itself is a reason to come, right?'

'But if all that you've said doesn't account for what you've photographed, and if you can in no way explain why you set out with that heavy camera, stopped walking at a certain place and time, placed your camera and took the shot, then it sounds to me like an absurd project. Certainly after this discussion. Pointless.'

It was quiet for a while on the other side of the line. I couldn't tell whether he was thinking or waiting for my reply. Then he said:

'If I could come, then I'd only be coming to see what photos with nothing in them look like.'

'If only that were true.'

'What do you mean, that there was nothing in them, or that I could come?'

'Both.'