

Perspectives – Expanded Photography: Notes on the Hyperimage

by Alfredo Cramerotti

Here are these two young fish swimming alone, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys, how's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"

- David Foster Wallace, commencement speech to a graduating class at Kenyon College, Ohio, 2006

The point of the short story above is that the most obvious and ubiquitous (and important) realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about.

A thought springs to mind in relation to photography: How many pictures have I been included in, have I absorbed, triggered or generated today? It seems that we are all 'implicated' in photography whether we like it or not; importantly, we constitute ourselves both as individuals and communities via this visual alphabet and visual database, a language that is neither written nor verbal, but visual and, increasingly, digital.



Photo: Michael Wolf, from the series 'A Series of Unfortunate Events'
www.photomichaelwolf.com

More than a practice, I understand photography as the concrete manifestation of cultural, interpersonal and technological conditions; photography now transcends a set of disciplines (or genres) and 'expands' into a multi-faceted feature of our experience of living that cross-references fields like mass media, economics, politics, law and social sciences. This approach takes on board the photographic element of our life as one of the principal factors of the constitution of our knowledge, and ultimately of us as persona. I therefore propose Expanded Photography as a constitutive language.

In the last few decades, the expansion of photography has taken place both as a practice, in terms of production, distribution and access to photography, and as a format itself. In fact, 'digitality' has massively accelerated this expanded condition, although it can be argued that photography was already pervasive in all major areas of social and cultural life well before the digital age, since the printed image has been surrounded by text from its origins. Photography as format went from still to moving, sound, and interactive visual links (connecting a photograph to other media formats which circulates outside the photography realm; what we can call, the hyperimage). It is stimulating to consider how the visual translation of ideas through various networked technological, cultural and social systems have a major impact on our lives.



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Background

The idea of Expanded Photography is an attempt (one among others) to make sense of photography 'in excess', that is, how it transcends its established definition. So-called 'prosumers' of visual information – users that re-produce content by circulating and re-contextualising what they receive, mainly through the web – become active participants of the filtering, curatorial and interpretative process that occurs every day in our various activities. They become a part of the information chain, a segment of the sequence of knowledge, which produces effects on the economic, political and social field.

In this process, photography's various categories are reconfigured, blurring the boundaries between (but not limited to) scientific, journalistic, personal, commercial and art photography. It's as though our society has freed image making from previously articulated specific applications, and rendered the photographic image a free-floating subject on its own, detached from any function or relation. Furthermore, it can no longer be attached solely to a camera-based activity, since now the act of making, manipulating, distributing and 'digesting' pictures is hybridized by devices like mobile phones, tablets and computers but, also, glasses (recently commercialized by the once-instant photo giant Polaroid), TV sets, game consoles, etc.

It is a matter of trying to understand how we can negotiate the space between the over-pollution of images and their original intensity through the medium of photography, precisely by expanding its notion. When we ask ourselves how images function, we look beyond how images are made, distributed, recycled or found; we take different contexts i.e. an Instagram collection of photographs of people, historical images of propaganda, commercial photography, cultural artefacts and so on, and bring them in sequence which each other generating new meaning, and possibly new effects on our lives.

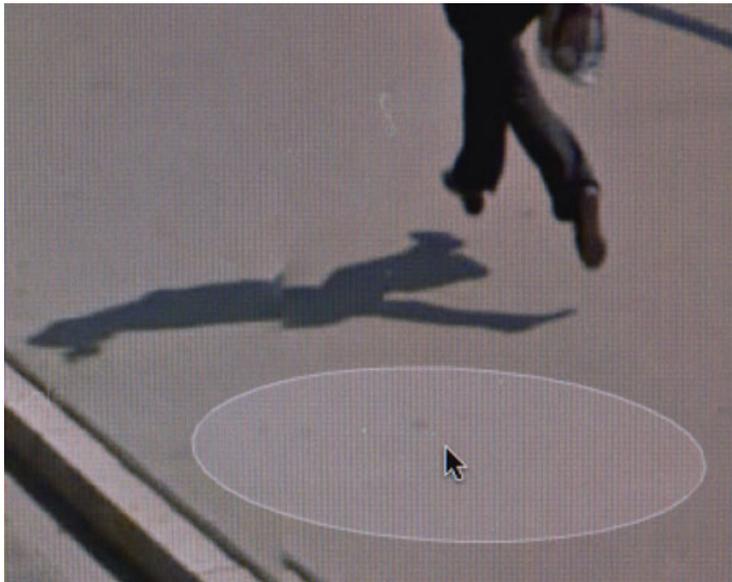


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Current Questions

Photography has outgrown its function as a purely representational agent and fully embraced the role of translational agent; not translating subjects, but rather translating the contexts, in which those subjects formed and live. The fact that photographs can be printed and passed from hand to hand, reproduced in books, newspapers and magazines, projected in private and public spaces, broadcast on television, streamed online or even processed via software that translates audio and sonic impulses into images, reveals that photography is clearly a matter of dissemination and format not of genre. If the important element today is not 'what' information is delivered but 'how' it is delivered, and in which context, then it is essential to understand the forms of communication that bring us the information.

We have 'universal' tools that can be applied to various operations across different media types as long as these media have been digitised (or created digitally), stored in common file formats, and embedded within common software platforms such as a desktop, a tablet, a phone, or the web. Photography today is a condition of data organised in data structures and databases, and the interfaces and the logic of popular software used to access, edit, and distribute this data; the feature of 'searchability' is a main one of such structures.

Another important aspect is that digitality has allowed photographs to have a high degree of 'remixability' – how easy it is to isolate parts of the objects and combine them with other objects. This depends on two reasons. First, all web browsers allow to select and save an image, embedded into a web page. Second, all image viewers and editors (from Preview to iPhoto to Photoshop) have built-in tools to crop and copy parts of digital photographs. Of course we are talking about photographs in their digital forms (i.e. computer files); however, when producers or mediators or 'prosumers' of photographs want to circulate their images to general public, they digitalise photographs obtained with other analogue techniques and put them online.

The resulting encoding of information within the digital environment no longer allows for separate fields of enquiry, like oil and water. With still and moving images moving 'freely' between software packages, broadcast, print, art or science – thus between one context and another – history-making itself is subject to the same fragmentary process. A couple of crucial questions are thus generated:

Question one:

The expansion of photography into other fields (and vice versa) is changing its methodology of inquiries along with their value and justification. How are these inquiries reconfiguring through the hyperimage (connecting a photograph to other media formats)? How did photography transform from being an agent of representation to become an agent of translation (from one context to another)?

Question two:

Since photography is no longer an activity or practice but a condition through which we live, what is photography's ontological status in the world when considered in relationship to the omnipresence and 'real time' of the digital image and of video?

Going Ahead

Instead of assuming that photography is a mechanism that transforms reality into images, we can invert the terms and see the photographer as translator, as facilitator of narratives. With us 'prosumers' blurring the previously defined roles in relation to visual information, not only the production and distribution of photography but also its reception is a process of formation, a fluid space of intermingling interests, practices, expectations and ideas. Most of the social relations between people are mediated by images. Photographic images affect us in the way we remember our past, imagine our future, choose our leaders, catch criminals or make them as such, to what we wear, what we buy, how we get the news, and our perception of war, people, science, environment, etc.

We are embedded in the condition of photography as we are in economics, politics, conventions or laws; in a way, Expanded Photography embodies the visual part of living today as the common substrata of our daily experience. It constitutes itself through our activity, news, trade, work, and leisure. It is science and art, nature and technology, representation and truth, social and political; it enters a 'mutual dependence' with other systems governing our life.

That is why is crucial an attempt to 're-purpose' the photographic magma beyond 'writing with light'. From technological development, creative practice, representation device, scientific instrument, social bond, translation tool, toward a visual language and database through which the individual constitutes as self. It will highlight how photography is no longer child of an object-oriented culture but rather the forbearer of a system-oriented culture; Expanded Photography's relevance emanates not from things, but from the way things are done.

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