

Notes on Expanded Photography

by Alfredo Cramerotti

The idea of expanded photography is an attempt (one among many) to make sense of photography 'in excess', that is, how it transcends its established definition. It takes on board the fact that photography may no longer be subdivided and talked about according to *genres* but, rather, is a sort of visual alphabet and a visual database. Significantly, its various categories have been reconfigured, blurring the boundaries between scientific, journalistic, personal, commercial or art photography. It's as though our society has freed image-making from specific applications, and rendered the photographic image an autonomous subject on its own, detached from any function or relation. Furthermore, it can no longer be attached solely to a camera-based activity, typical of a certain discourse of photography (including street photography, for instance) since now the act of making, manipulating, distributing and 'digesting' pictures is hybridized by devices like (mobile) phones and computers but, also, glasses (Polaroid), TV sets, game consoles and so on.

The Photographical

Everyone can see, in his/her own daily activities, that photography has dissolved into a magma of images (is this a tautology? Are photographs and images the same?) (Foncuberta full citation?); in other words, it is losing its historical and medium specificity, and expanding its scope. It is our daily fare. How many pictures have you been included in, have you absorbed, triggered or generated today? We are all, more than ever, 'implicated' in photography whether we like it or not; 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 (should you add 'and, importantly, digital?').

We could define this constitutive visual language as 'the photographical'. Drawing a parallel with, yet taking a specific character from, the notion of expanded cinema, this way of reasoning implicates photography as a multi-faceted, expanded feature of our living that cross-references fields such as mass-media, economics, politics, law and social science. The *photographical* is a whole body of experience that embraces (and is mediated by) a great variety of relations, interests and possibilities to become the principal manifestation and constitutive element of our human condition in the 21st century. This process is not only taking place *in* but also *through* the public realm. The visualization of our acts, stories and indeed our thoughts is what now constitutes the main discourse of the public realm. There's no public sphere

without the sharing of experiences and opinions, and in our age what we share most are images. They have become a commodity. We trade our existence in images, and we shape ourselves through them.

We need to refer to images (and image-making) in order to act politically, socially, culturally. An expanded photography is now the set of conditions that facilitates our awareness of such interconnected layers – a visual system that searches, finds and acts out meaning *as* it constitutes it (with or without camera). Recollected, imagined or existing photographs contribute to our knowledge and perception of the world and of ourselves. Thus expanded photography is an approach to life that, nevertheless passes through different stages, different visual systems, through different signs and formats. The *photographical* functions as *hyperimage*, translating and transcoding (visual) information from one format to another.

We, Who Make It Happen

We commonly relate our idea of photography to imagination, truth, memory and history – regardless of whether it is staged, candid, studio or street photography. But as we move in space (physical, imagined or virtual locations) and time (linear or alinear), photography allows us to create new connections between forms of communication and expression of the self. An expanded concept of photography – like the film and video practices of expanded cinema – alters the so-called 'architecture of reception', transcending the historical and cultural experience of the viewer. It also helps to change the generative aspects of image-making itself, transforming photographic practice into something heterogeneous, performative, seamless, infinite. This is more than simply taking a picture or inventing an image; as outlined above, it is about constituting the self visually.

Producers, mediators and receivers alike all act as translators – not really engaging with their (which? The photographs'?) subjects directly but with the narratives in which these people's lives are entangled. That is precisely where 'the public realm' comes in, as the latter is generated, shaped and understood by these acts of translation. 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.

The reception of photography is a process of formation, a fluid space of intermingling interests, practices, expectations and ideas. The fact that photographs can be printed and passed from hand to hand, reproduced in books, newspapers and magazines, projected in galleries, community centres and public spaces, broadcast on television, streamed online or even processed

via software that translates audio and sonic impulse in images, reveals that photography is clearly a matter of dissemination not of *genre*. If today the important element is not 'what' information is delivered but 'how', then what is essential to understand are the forms of communication that bring us the information. It is photography in its expanded dimension that mostly plays this role.

Ultimately, it is a matter of a changed perspective: understand the viewer as generating the image, 'working on' the image and transgressing the image; bringing him/herself into the image while showing and absorbing what the image is about. We partake in the labour of imaging and representing; each of us intervenes in the image-making and claims space for her or himself in the story of the witness, in the archive, in the report of the journalist, in the presentation of the scientist. (There is no more 'outside' of the visible since we are constituted by it. I realise I'm being recalcitrant here! However, could it be that the image and viewer are locked in an endlessly reciprocal relationship?)

The Here and Now, Actualised.

The image-making process is always and necessarily the 'making of meaning'. The process continually melds past, present and future, cognition and emotion.

Expanded photography requires the *photographical* entering a mutual relationship with other economies including art, mass media and architecture, science and law, all the while constantly shifting society's perception of itself through non-photographic disciplines. Its vehicles of communication are curatorial practice, education, the media and publishing, but concern projects that are 'implicitly' rather than 'explicitly' photographic. When artists, editors, producers, cultural mediators and curators open up a space to cross boundaries with other realms of society, a daunting terrain materializes suddenly. In fact, producers and consumers alike become active participants in the process, since they become a part of the information chain, a segment of the sequence of 'knowledge'. Inscribing oneself into the image and image-making process is the only way left to participate in life; moving into the interior of the image, into the work and the discourse that lies behind the image, becoming part of it, and the medium. Expanded photography is, thus, about experiential truth.

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