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Authenticity – A Matter of Commitment

We probably encounter hundreds of photographs every day. The vast majority of them are printed in ink. On rare occasions an ink-printed photograph makes us stop. This is usually because of its pictorial content, but also sometimes because of something in the being of the physical object itself. An ink-photograph can possess qualities which can yield an aesthetic experience for the viewer. According to a framework of pragmatist aesthetics this experience can be understood as art.¹

The intensity of the aesthetic experience may be augmented by, among other things, authenticity. I shall focus on the conception of authenticity in relation to photographs printed in ink. The question is: what are the factors that enhance authenticity in a photograph printed with ink? I shall touch upon this subject from my own perspective, which is that of a photographer who is using the ink-printed photograph as a means of expression. As a member of the group of Finnish artist photographers involved in this field, I have been making ink-photographs for almost twenty years. I have made single prints or compiled them into the form of portfolios and books. Even though my discussion is on ink-printed photographs, many of the thoughts apply to printmaking in general.

Let us start by defining the kind of prints we are discussing. A photograph printed in ink is usually understood as a reproduction of the original photograph. And a reproduction is generally considered to be something which strives to copy the original as accurately as possible. The new image is seen as a duplication of the original. There are, however, differences in the degree of duplication. These differences, and the way in which the reproduction has come about, have a significant effect on the aesthetic identity of the reproductions. I claim that the production history is crucial in determining whether or not the encounter with an ink-photograph becomes an aesthetic experience. The aesthetic identity of the

1. Dewey, 1980 (1934).

reproductions can be totally disparate, even if the starting point is the same original photograph.

Throughout the history of the graphic arts a great many techniques have been developed. In the beginning of the nineteenth-century photography was invented along with photomechanical reproduction methods, which gradually liberated the hand of man for tasks other than the making of copies of images.² By then the engravers making reproductions had developed rather habitual styles which gave little room for artistic expression. When photomechanical reproduction methods took over the task of reproduction, there was a chance for manual graphic methods to get rid of the mechanical style and instead become a medium for creative artists. This was one of the elements behind the appearance of the concept of original graphic art.

Photography was from the beginning used to portray nature or man-made objects (among them also pictures). Most photographs were important because of the pictorial information that they contained. It was very much in the interest of the media to be able to circulate this information. To make this possible, much work was done to develop and perfect methods of reproducing and printing photographs.

Photography was, however, also making its way as an independent art. It was obvious that the qualities of photography lay not only in its reproductive abilities. It also possessed strong expressive qualities of its own. Some original photographic prints - those that usually were made from the original negative, usually by the photographer-artist himself - claimed the status of works of art. These images were often a matter of discussion in the media, and it was important to be able to publish them in periodicals and books. Also, among photographers there was a desire to communicate to a larger number of people through their images. It is, after all, one of the very basic characteristics of photography that it is multipliable.³

2. For many decades, however, craftsmen carved the blocks for reproductions in the wood engraving technique by hand. These blocks were often also made from photographs as originals.

3. Already in 1839 William Henry Fox Talbot insisted that his method of making photographs was better than the daguerrotype because of its ability for duplicating images. This was particularly important for the publication of works including photographs. It was on this basis that the future of photography (and the decline of the daguerrotype) would be established. Frizot, 1998 (1994), p. 28.

In the early years of photography there were those who connected the future of the medium directly with its transition to ink on paper; Ernest Lacan, editor of *La Lumière*, wrote in 1856: 'For us, photography, however complete in its results, is only a transitory process; the future lies with heliographic engraving or photolithography.'⁴

Publishing photographs as books, portfolios etc. became important. One of the main reasons for this was that exhibitions are limited in the number of people they reach as well as in their permanency. Once an exhibition has been dismantled it is out of reach for the audience that saw it. The book format also offers many expressive possibilities that have to do with the arranging of images and combining them with typographic elements, text and so forth.

Therefore, once the technical conditions were there, 'art photography' was also printed in ink. The ambition of photographers was, however, not only to reproduce as much information as possible about the original. The ink-printed image was not merely a picture of the original artwork, the photographic print, but an entirely new thing, and explicitly, even in the ink-printed state, a work of art. Using ink-printed photographs in such a way came to form a tradition of its own.

The question remains: What makes certain ink-printed photographs something other than what we may call 'mere reproductions'? Why are some ink-photographs considered to be objects of art, even if they are produced through standard methods of graphic technology, for example offset lithography, which is today's most commonly used printing method?

Let us return to the concept of authenticity. Authenticity is often connected to that which may have the status of an artwork. Both authenticity and originality are complex notions that for the last two centuries have been at the core of aesthetic discussion concerning Western art. The debate has been particularly evident within the graphic arts. The concepts have been re-evaluated in the postmodern era, and because of the varied use and definitions I shall start by clarifying what I mean by authenticity.

4. Lacan quoted in Aubenas, 1998 (1994), p. 225.

Perhaps the most obvious use of the concept is when authenticity is contrasted with fakery or forgery. In the field of photography authenticity is discussed when there is a question of deception. Is the scene that the photograph is showing authentic, or is it fake?

Fake and forgery can also mean the intentional forging of an authentic art object. The fake is intentionally made to resemble the original in order for the fake to be mistaken as the original.

Yet another way in which the notion is used is when authenticity means a feature of an attitude or personality which a work of art can embody or express. An artist may wish to express himself in a way which accurately arrests the experience, the perception or the vision which is recorded, just for the reason that it is, at least to some extent, unique in some appreciated way. If the artist is able to genuinely communicate that which was personally discovered and strongly felt, and which distinguished the experience, the perception or the vision, and if the uniqueness of what is communicated in the art object is connected to that specific individual in a credible way, then the art work is authentic. Authenticity is, thus, something genuine that derives from an individual's attitude or personality, and which a work of art can possess.⁵

Since I am concerned with book art and graphic art as media for artistic expression, the latter type of authenticity becomes especially important. I am looking for authenticity in the concrete, singular art product. The possible authenticity of a print, a portfolio or a book has a substantial effect on its aesthetic identity. I claim that the identity of these art products, and the identity of the images in them, is related to how and with what intentions they are produced, and that this has consequences for the way in which they are viewed and judged.

The connection of the production of an artwork to the specific individual, the one who created it, is also fundamental. A work of art would certainly have turned out differently had it not been affected by just that individual's personal history and

5. Taylor, 1995 (1992), pp. 27-30.

had it not been part of just his or her particular body of work. Paul Crowther states that artistic authenticity is distinguished by the fact that its achievement logically presupposes the existence of just that individual, who is in fact responsible for its achievement. He claims that we need not just *a* creative individual, but *that* one.⁶ The creator of the artwork and the audience can meet on common ground in an 'aesthetic mode of empathy which engages rational, sensible, social and historical factors in an inseparable unity'.⁷

In photography (ink-photographs included), there are two basic ways in which authenticity can emerge. Firstly through the emergence of *new* authenticity. And secondly through 'transfer' of authenticity from one stage in the production process to another. The first way is connected to what can be called the paradigm of interpretation and the second to the paradigm of reproduction. The paradigm of interpretation emphasizes the interpretative share of the artist, while the paradigm of reproduction is about the reproductive qualities of photography as a medium. In order to illustrate what I mean, we shall examine the same image in view of both paradigms.

The treatment of subject matter, when photographing and when making the photographic print, can result in originality according to the paradigm of interpretation. Or, using Georg Gadamer's terminology, the intentional differentiation of subject matter and picture can lead to something novel and creative.⁸ Let us choose a picture of my own, for example an image which I photographed in Istanbul. It is a rather dark picture with a bare tree in which a large number of pigeons sit. Under the tree we can see minarets of a nearby mosque. It is obvious that I have made my own interpretation of the scene. For example, the positioning of the camera and the use of a certain kind of lens has determined the relation between foreground and background. These are quite normal photographic routines but, nevertheless, interpretative. Also, things done in the darkroom, such as making the photographic print considerably darker than the scene was at the time when the photograph was taken, are interpretation. These, among others, were actions that I took when I, through my personality, was

6. Crowther, 1991, pp. 301-309.

7. Ibid.

8. Gadamer, 1975 (1960), pp. 121-127.

striving to genuinely communicate my experience. If authenticity emerges when the photograph is viewed, it is invariably a *new* aesthetic identity that ensues as a result of the interpretation that was made. The same thing may occur when the photograph is printed in ink. If the reproduction is characterized by interpretation - through the actions taken during the reproductive process - *new* authenticity and originality may be experienced. According to the paradigm of interpretation the aesthetic identity of the image can renew itself in every stage of the process.

Photography, in essence, is undeniably a reproductive medium. It is well suited for recording the world and communicating what was registered to a viewer. Looking at the picture from Istanbul it is obvious that the image conveys many authentic facts from the scene that I saw and then registered on film. The situation was genuine. The tree, the pigeons, the minarets, everything was in front of me, there and then. Despite the interpretation that was done, first when the photographic print was made and then when the image was reproduced in ink, most of the visual facts that were recorded on the original negative are still there. Some degree of authenticity connected to the situation in Istanbul in March 1996 has been 'transferred' through the different stages to the ink-photograph. This authenticity can perhaps be experienced in the image.

With reference to the earlier definitions of the notion of authenticity, if I have been able to genuinely communicate something of the scene in Istanbul and if the image is connected to my personality, then the image can possess authenticity.

Viewed through the paradigm of reproduction, photographs can be said to communicate 'facts'. The images tell us about the state of things, how things looked etc., and they can do this in a more or less genuine way. The paradigm of reproduction is connected to the subject matter of the image. Viewed through the paradigm of interpretation, issues related to the *being* of the image become dominant. What is at stake is *how* the thing represented is represented in the picture. When we are discussing ink-printed photographs this, of course, ties the paradigm of interpretation closely to how the reproduction process was performed. It is a matter of a certain attitude to the working process itself.

A reproduction process which is signified by intentional interpretation is about generating *new* authenticity in the ink-image. Simultaneously, however, due to the intrinsic reproductive nature of the photomechanical methods, an interpretative reproduction process also fulfils its obligations in the paradigm of reproduction. As we can see, the paradigms are not mutually exclusive. Since so many photographers are interested in conveying something that they have encountered, and wish to do this through personal interpretation and their medium, they are operating within both paradigms.

We have seen that if authenticity is to be found in a photographic reproduction, then the print must include some degree of interpretation or intentionality. The interpretation must be connected to a specific personality, as a rule that of the artist.

However, differences in the history of production of a photograph printed in ink can lead to considerable variations in the aesthetic identity of the reproductions. The ink-printed photograph is completed through a multi-stage process. It derives from the original negative, from which a photographic print is usually made; the original print is then photomechanically or digitally made ready for the press and after that printed in ink on paper. It is easy to see that there are printed photographs with very disparate identities. Therefore, not all printed images, even if they originate from the same photograph, can have the same aesthetic identity. In order to show that the identity of an ink-printed photograph can vary considerably, and that we need to know the history of production to distinguish its real aesthetic identity, we shall follow two paths starting with the same original.

Let us commence by defining the photograph we are discussing. Let it be an authentic photographic print that has the status of a work of art. It may be a photograph that hangs on the wall of a reputable art museum. As an example, let us choose Paul Strand's well-known image, *Man, Tenancingo*, from 1933.

In one case, Strand's photograph is being reproduced and printed on the pages of a book, for example in connection with an exhibition.⁹ The ink-printed image in the book represents the original photograph that hangs on the wall in the museum. The reproduction aims to show the qualities of the original. By looking at the picture in the book we are able to see the Mexican peasant, his strong features, the folds of his white shirt, his hand marked by work etc. If the book is well printed we can see the details clearly, and we can also get an impression of the tonality of the original print. Regardless of all these qualities, we are still confronted with an image which is mainly trying to imitate and show the external features of the original. This is the ambition of the reproduction. The ink-printed image always refers to the original photograph. The reproduction stems from the original, and it has no claims to an autonomous identity. There are no *artistic* ambitions in this reproductive process. Nevertheless, at least part of the photo-artistic qualities of the original image can still be perceived. The qualities of the original are conveyed by the reproduction. However, considering the history of production of the ink-printed image in the book, it is obvious that it cannot be considered as an authentic art object. The artistic qualities of the same original are presented in many books and, using a musical analogy, these reproductions can be seen as other performances of the original composition. But the most important fact, with respect to my argument, is that they all strive to reproduce the features of the original photograph. They do this more or less successfully.

The same photograph by Paul Strand, *Man, Tenancingo*, was reproduced in a different way as well. In 1940 Strand spent several months working, together with a printer, on a photogravure portfolio of his Mexican photographs. *Man, Tenancingo* is one of the twenty images included.

The portfolio was magnificently printed by craftsmen of the Photogravure and Color Company in Manhattan. The plates were made from films that Strand made himself, being dissatisfied with the films made by the printers. It was a radical thing at the time for a photographer to cross the borderline between the trades

9. Paul Strand's *Man, Tenancingo*, 1933 was published e.g. in Sarah Greenough: *Paul Strand, An American Vision*, in connection with an exhibition at The National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2 December 1990 - 3 February 1991. Greenough, 1990, p. 89.

and intrude on the craft of the professional printer.¹⁰ Strand carefully chose ink and paper, and supervised the whole production process himself. The portfolio is generally considered to be one of the most outstanding examples of quality ink-printing of photographs. It immediately became a collector's item, and a new edition was made in 1967.

Comparing the production histories, it is evident that it was entirely different in this latter case. The artist's personal effort and creativity throughout the process was significant. The way in which the work was presented and the fact that it was included in collections, in art discourse etc., shows that it has been accepted as art by the art world. Clearly, the reproduction of *Man, Tenancingo* which was included in the portfolio *Photographs of Mexico* has an aesthetic identity that is quite different from that of the reproductions of the same photograph in other books. Even though the starting point is the same photograph and the end result, in both cases, is an ink-printed reproduction of the photograph, the history of production clearly shows that the result is completely different. And what particularly matters is the artist's commitment to the work and his personal involvement in the production process.

Authenticity can be seen as a ramification of the artist's personality, deriving either from the artistic act or the artistic intention. When referring to the artistic act, the main concern is with the artwork as an actual object which has been filled with the personality of the artist, and therefore is seen as authentic. The personality of the artist is transferred by the artistic act, the execution itself, through which the art product becomes authentic. This principle of transferring authenticity has been called *the action principle*.¹¹ A typical example of this is when the artist executes the entire process himself. This principle puts emphasis on the technical execution.

On the other hand, when referring to the intention of the artist, the work of art is seen as a mental object which is conveyed to the observer by the material substratum in which it has settled. Authenticity is seen as the consequence of the artist's aim or intention. The artist can also be said to guide the execution of his work through his intention, and thus authorize its authenticity. This is called *the*

10. Benson, 1990, p. 107 f.

11. af Burén, 1992, pp. 174 ff.

intention principle.¹² This principle applies when the artist, through his intentions, guides or leads the creation of the artwork and authorizes it, for example by signing the print. The feature common to both principles is that authenticity is determined and guaranteed entirely by the artist.¹³ We can see that the authenticity in Paul Strand's Mexican prints was transferred through a combination of the action principle (he, for example, made the film positives himself) and the intention principle (he carefully supervised the printing, which was carried out by somebody else).

One additional principle can be introduced. The 'art interested society' or the art world gives the artwork the status of an authentic work according to the paradigms of what can be considered art. The artists lay their works before the art society for acceptance. This application of an institutional art theory is called *the transaction principle*.¹⁴

An artist concerned with the making of things may be less interested in the institutional art theories. When craftsmanship and the making of artefacts are at the core then the action principle and the intention principle seem to be the central ways in which the art object may be given authenticity.

As a conclusion: A photographer who communicates his or her artistic vision through ink-printed images may want the printed image, understood as an object, to possess authenticity deriving from the artist's own personality. Authenticity in the art object is thought to intensify the aesthetic experience of the encounter with the artefact. The authenticity is connecting the viewer with the artist. If this personal linkage is to exist, the production of the artefact cannot be signified by routine operations carried out by anonymous executors or preset mechanical proceedings. If no new authenticity emerges in the final stage - that is the print or the book that the viewer holds in his hands - then the product lacks something in its ability to render an aesthetic experience. Close involvement in the production proceedings is a requirement for authenticity to emerge in each step of the process. Without personal commitment in the making of an art product, something

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid. pp. 175 ff.

of the artefact's authenticity is lost, and thus, also something of its expressive strength.

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Are you an authentic leader? The connection between authenticity and resilient leadership is perhaps best grasped as a process of greater mindfulness. It is found in individuals who are able to understand their reactions and coping mechanisms, and how these impact others around them. These individuals are more likely to show resilience along with an ability to lead, and they are also likely to inspire those around them to take on new responsibilities and build a common sense of mission and values. When it comes to effective leadership, there is no downside to becoming more authentic, nor is th Color did not matter to Mandela; people mattered. This is a powerful example of the power of authenticity as Mandela did what he expected others to do if they needed to leave the past behind and move forward as a nation. Being an Executive Coach I am constantly challenging myself in this area. Recently I ran a leadership training session with a co-facilitator, Maria (this is a fictitious name).Â I also informed her that I did not feel that she kept her commitment of giving me the space as the lead facilitator. She was very upset with me and said that she felt stifled if she did not speak whenever she felt the need to. A couple of days later she informed the co-coordinator of the network that she did not work with me anymore as my style was not comfortable for her. I was devastated.