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Larsson, Erika

2012

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Larsson, E. (2012). *Empathic Visions – Globalization and Situated Differences in Contemporary Photography*. 1-5. Paper presented at Helsinki Photomedia – Images in Circulation.

Total number of authors:
1

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Download date: 20. Apr. 2024

Empathic Visions – Globalization and Situated Differences in Contemporary Photography

I want to start with a reference to Arjun Appadurai who says that the story of globalization as (only) cultural homogenization is a severe simplification. He says that this way of seeing globalization neglects to pay attention to the idea of "situated difference", by which he refers not to any essentialising notion of cultural difference, but, on the contrary, to an ever changing idea of difference, which is understood "in relation to something local, embodied, and significant". The purpose of this paper is to explore how three contemporary photographic artworks engage with these kinds of situated differences within globalized spaces. As Charlotte Cotton and others have pointed out, it been possible to a see a trend in the last years in terms of how artists working with photography are moving on from a criticism of image-making, which tends to render the photographic socially irrelevant, towards using artistic strategies that attempt to retain the social, political and interpersonal relevance of photography. As I will discuss, in this trend, photographers and artists can be seen to find this relevance in moving towards working with what Jill Bennett calls "affectively charged space", with the intention not of representing events or situations (or criticising the possibility for doing this) but of *engaging* photographically in the spaces where situated (and often drastically unequal and unjust) differences are enacted, and opening up aspects of these spaces to be affectually experienced and shared.

The first piece that I want to discuss is called "Are there any palm trees in Grozny" and in it Banu Cennetoğlu explores the space of a particular part of Istanbul. The work is made up of a map, a text and a series of photographs presented as a slide show. In the text, we learn that the space documented and mapped contains military barracks, a beach club and a defunct recreational area for railway workers, but also that, unbeknownst to most of the people living in the neighbourhood, at the time when Cennetoğlu made her investigation into the space, part of the defunct recreational area hosted some 160 Chechen refugees. As the artist explains, this makeshift refugee camp had been constructed some time earlier as a temporary solution, involving, as in so many other similar cases, a potential safety hazard for the refugees. The text, which accompanies the piece also explains how the area that is now a beach club came to take its present shape, through a process in which 35 palm trees found their way from Egypt to be planted in 4000 cubic metres of sand that had also been moved to the land. So, what is presented in the piece through these different media is thus a highly complex and

heterogeneous space, which connects directly to a range of pressing issues such as militarism and the control of citizens and non-citizens, questions of nationalism, homogenization, commercialism, authoritarianism, as well as the the vulnerability of refugees. As the curator of an exhibition that included this work explains, Cennetoğlu "starts with the local and touches problems shared on a global level". The most apparent of these concerns is the geopolitical inequality that places individuals in such close proximity to each other geographically, but at the same time in such drastically different worlds in terms of opportunities, rights, etc. On the map, the ships carrying goods and bodies between ports make up visually pleasing patterns in the ocean. From this perspective, it is easy to imagine that the distant perspective of the map can provide sufficient knowledge of the bodies, spaces, and actions that make up the everyday lived lives of a globalized spaces. This position hides the depth of the situated and incarnate, and makes it easy to imagine that the easy solution to the messiness of shared geographies is to make to castigate the "foreign" elements of the heterogeneous Istanbul. In contrast to the information and patterns presented in the text and in the map, however, I suggest that what is brought out in the photographical depictions is the rather the substance and difference of situated space. The materiality of the space itself tells very little and can not give much more than a lingering sense of the desperate, frivolous or controlling lives and actions that are carried out in the geography. What the photographs are able to do, however, is to bring the nuance of sensation to the story hinted at in the text, as a reminder that resonates in physical space of the incarnation of this story in the complexities and ambiguities of situated space. In this way, the way that for example the concrete appears in the piece brings it into visibility and perceptual meaning as inseparable from the lives lived, actions carried out, and global patterns incarnated in the space. Rather that representing a space, the photographs in this case can as such be seen as a particularly potent engagement, which brings out certain aspects of a certain situated space to be engaged with affectually. Leaving behind the distinction between the "real" material or space and its "representation", the photographs here are more fruitfully seen as interventions into a space, making actual aspects of its dormant virtualities, if you like (I'm borrowing from Deleuze's concept of the virtual). I want to make a connection here also to Merleau-Ponty, who talks of those ideas, or that understanding of the world, which is not a reduction of embodied experience. As he puts it "ideas that are too much possessed are no longer ideas", but are just a skeleton of an understanding that resides in the embodied and the incarnated. In Cennetoğlu's piece, it is possible to recognize how the photographs bring attention to how certain events that relate to global trends are incarnated within a particular situated space, and open up an affectual

engagement with this space, functioning thereby to "de-possess" the ideas concerned and re-situate them in embodied experience.

Another recent work (which a lot of you have probably seen) by Taryn Simon, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters,* can be seen precisely as an exploration of the space between the desire or illusion of reaching knowledge or understanding about relations in the world through taking a distant and detached position in relation to bodies, objects and spaces, and how photographic depictions reveal these relations as densely situated in materiality. The piece is made up of eighteen 'chapters', with each chapter charting a particular family bloodline in a particular place in the world through photographs and written descriptions. In each chapter, the bloodline is documented in three panels. The first panel presents the human (at one point animal) subjects of the chapter in standardized portraits; the second provides a text describing some background information as well as a list of the names of the subjects and objects of the flanking panels; and the third reveals a set of photographically recorded objects, which relate in some way to the story of that chapter. The chapters include, for example, the family tree of Shivdutt Yadav, an Indian man declared dead by the authorities and struggling to be recognized as living and thus able to profit from his ancestral farmland. The plainness of the documentations and the painstakingly orderly way in which the documents have been presented, in particular in the first and second panel, make it *appear* as if there is a wider pattern to be grasped, a general structure that governs the individuals and objects perceived. But despite these intentions, it soon becomes clear that any discernable pattern in the piece is an illusion, and that underneath the apparent symmetry is in fact multitude of difference in bodies, materiality, and ideas. While the title and presentation of the piece seems to promise the coherence of an articulated story, the photographs themselves reveal rather the opacity of the objects and bodies of incarnated, situated space. In the third panel in particular, seemingly random objects and documents open up the stories to the infinities of the lived material space that contain them. The third panel of the bloodline of Shivdutt Yadav shows a worn and stained letter to the chief judicial magistrate demanding recognition that Shivdutt Yadav and his family members are living and maintain legal title to their land, as well as an arresting close up of a corpse floating in the Ganges river. When engaging with these depictions, the perceiver has little choice but to leave behind the organizing and meaning-making faculties that are set in motion when first encountering the piece, and instead consider the possibility that "answers" to the questions apparently posed by the piece are potentially found as much in the affective experience of these indeterminate objects and actions. Or, as Merleau-Ponty puts

it, “the secret of the world we are seeking must necessarily be contained in my contact with it”.

In the final piece, photography is again used in similarly contrasting ways in order to bring attention to the dynamics of a particular site of global movements and interactions. Often in literature on globalization, information is seen as somehow ‘circulating’ in abstract space, rather than coming from somewhere and going somewhere. In this piece, *La Ville Blanc,* the x_urban collective engages in one particularly poignant space which material goods are arriving to and being shipped from. The piece engages with the particular port city of Marseille and part of the piece shows the pixeled close up photographs of the architectural rendering of a development project to be realized in the centre of Marseille. The photographs covering the walls around the construction site are themselves constructed from stock images to create a simulacra of the non-situated people and objects that are generated to populate the standardized architecture of the gated communities, shopping malls, and office spaces of the global city. It is across these constructed images that somebody scribbled the grammatically incorrect title of the piece, the mistake suggesting that it was written by somebody without perfect proficiency in the language, and likely to be positioned outside the imaginary space of the architectural rendering. But the majority of the photographs of *La Ville Blanc* are not made of the simulacral constructions of stock images, but use the camera to explore the situated space of the harbour area, the space at which the land and the sea meet and the riches of the sea and other parts of the world are brought in to be sold, re-organized or just passed on to continue their journey by other means. Through hundreds of photographs and long video shots of the endless motions of the sky, the sea, the coastline, the harbour space with its hundreds of containers waiting to be shipped off and the enormous amounts of fish caught at sea and brought to the harbour every day, what these photographs do more than anything else is to bring attention to the material situatedness of this endless motion. In contrast with the photographs of the architectural renderings, which seem to fix a certain easily recognizable visual pattern that is at work throughout globalized space, the sea and harbour images rather unfold aspects of the situated, material space that it engages with. The shapes and hues of the passing clouds, and the seemingly endless delivery of fish are revealed in their particular shininess, sliminess, brightness or dullness. The shore itself with its rocks and pebbles is brought out to be seen and felt in relation to its eternal meeting and separation from the sea. So, as suggested earlier, this perspective on the photographic brings attention to the possibility of these photographic renditions opening up what Jill Bennett calls “affectively

charged space", which is not just the expression of a particular inner experience or external situation, but precisely an unfolding of an experience, which can never be extracted from the particular situated space in which it is encountered. What's more is that Bennett makes a connection to the way that Spivak talks of the necessity of *listening* when describing this space. And reconnecting to Appadurai's idea of "situated difference" again, Bennett, as Spivak before her, sees in this an act of empathy, in which the listener/perceiver/feeler does not project what s/he already knows onto the encounter, but actively and affectively engages with the meeting as one actor amongst many, out of which none has the ultimate privilege to interpret the situation in one particular way. In *La Ville Blanc*, the artists deliberately included what they themselves call "neglibly small" actors in this encounter, those participants that normally are not given the space to speak and be heard, including not only human actors but animals and mineral participants as well, and opened up an "affectively charged space" in which these actors could be empathically perceived.

To sum up, this perspective functions as to place the photograph not in the realm of meaning but in the realm of embodied acting, which makes it an object of ethics rather than of knowledge. And again, these photographic practices, and this way of approaching them, are able to move beyond the impasse of simply criticising the inability of photographs to represent, to a range of new possibilities within which the photographs are able to intervene into the fragments of globalized space and potentially open up these kind of spaces of affective and empathic encounters.