**Visibilility and realism: Photography and the problems of transparency**

**Duncan Wooldridge**, University of the Arts London

**Abstract**

Photography’s initial claim to represent has been derived from a privileging of the visible world, which, it might be argued, is reinforced by the limited visibility of the camera. The proliferations of utilitarian photographies, therefore, are necessarily also the elimination of the non-visible. Such a notion of visibility, when contested, might provide the starting point for a reconception of the photographic in which the apparently indexical medium is filtered through alternative relationships to representation, transparency and, ultimately, even the discourse of realism. This article proposes that an alternative conception of realism might sceptically underline the limitation of the photographic apparatus in relating to but also limiting the world.

**Keywords**

visibility

transparency

realism

post-naturalism

testimony

abstraction

When the world in front of us is hard to grasp – when it is no longer quite so immediately visible – conventional representation becomes a problem. How do we see – actually see – our invisible and apparently dematerialized world? And how might we see it with a device, the camera, which was made to represent the visible and material? Might we see around the corner as it were, beyond the shiny veneers of our technological present? Can our knowledge – predicated so thoroughly upon the purely visual – the optical – allow for that which we cannot possibly see without mediation, which is held at a distance from us?

We readily accept that the world we occupy connects us by signals that we cannot see, through devices we neither fully operate nor understand (outside of their user-friendly interfaces). As we know, a knowledge of photography is not in any way a prerequisite for making a photograph. As the philosopher Vilem Flusser states, ‘The camera is a structurally complex, but functionally simple, plaything. In this respect, it is the opposite of chess, which is a structurally simple, and functionally complex, game’ (2000: 58). As Flusser indicates, the technics of the photograph have long been taken away from the operator. It is hidden from us, rendered smooth, though it is not of course absent altogether We might go so far as to say that late modernity found its model in the black box and the Brownie camera: behind a pressed button existed a process of design and initial manufacture, and a subsequent processing of exposed film, often managed within a factory setting. The invisibility of this process continues to belie the emergent visibilities of photographic subject matters. Its visibilities necessitate an equal or greater degree of obscurity.

And so, we should begin to see the conditions of a supposedly immaterial culture by problematizing our predilection for the visible: photography concerns itself with a specific non-industrial photograph-ability, where visibility becomes equivalent to presence. This is the ‘I was there’/‘it is here’ dualism of the photograph. The emergence of the digital image does not produce these conditions, though it perpetuates, even intensifies, our dependence on the visible. In its concern for a suppression of the industrial complex of the image and its production, it encourages manicured representations of leisure. And so it might be asserted that photographs have proliferated just as late industrial infrastructures require ever more resources, as if continually covering over the labours that it rests upon. What results are instances of photographic excess: the activity to be photographed, to be carried out in conjunction with the production of ever more pictures, asserting once again specific visibilities. Photography inscribes itself in our behaviour. Erik Kessels, an artist, collector and publisher of vernacular photographs, explores how the act of photography has become both habit and ritual. In each example of his series, In Almost Every Picture, Kessels presents the habitual process of photography. Each project captures the repetitive habit of taking photographs, presenting a single subject, object or act over multiple pages. Among Kessel’s collections are not only family albums but rituals wholly built around photography – fairground games that result in photographs, and fetishes that are completed by the photograph itself. In their quantity, they assert the usual ‘I was here/it was there’ claim to the presence of the photograph, but extend it until it is clear that the photographic apparatus itself has been written into the event. Such a ritual goes far beyond earlier models of habitual photography found in Pierre Bourdieu’s study, in *Photography: A Middle Brow Art* (1996), where the photograph is identified as the social glue of a dispersed family newly displaced by changing working conditions. Whether shaped by migration and the fragmentation of the family, or by new leisure time, it becomes photography’s post-industrial programme to produce more and more images.

In one edition of Kessel’s project, a dog-owning couple encounters a problem: they persistently attempt to record their black Alsatian. They seek an image, to no avail – the dog always appears as a silhouette. In each image, it becomes increasingly clear to us, as it must have been for them, that their act of photography – which functions as a conventional ritual and aid to memory – is doomed to failure. Resorting not to postproduction - the photographs are pre-photoshop – but occasionally to a variety of tests, inside and outside, in a variety of light – including a flashlight that comically bleaches out the dog altogether - the limits of photography win out against intention: we might say the limits of the camera meet the limits of its operator, who has run out of ideas; we witness an act of photography taking place against the constraints of the technical image, against the limits of the conventionally visible.

In July 2014, Kessel’s analogue tragedy found its digital farce. *The Telegraph* and *Independent* newspapers reported that the popularity of image-based social media is now so great that more than 70 per cent of unwanted cats are black – as they do not 'share' well on Instagram. What is revealed of course is that the conditions of visibility have not changed significantly between the analogue and digital in terms of what can be seen by the apparatus. Long after Godard, a digital sensor can still not record black details. But we have also witnessed a turn: from the limit of what can be photographed to an editing of the world so as to conform to the photosensitivity of the smartphone camera. That is to say, the photographic device reverse-engineers the world in its image. It deselects that which cannot be photographed, and choreographs not only a series of events for the purpose of photography but the entirety of its surroundings, in awareness of its photographic potentiality. So integrated is our compulsion to photograph that the conditions of photographic visibility have begun to produce strange quasi-biopolitical effects.

I want to make two serious points from my somewhat comic critique of the visible: first, that my example of Instagram demonstrates conclusively that photography itself is an actor – an actant, or agent, in the production of social relations, in which photography is a central means of interaction. It is now more than ever the case that the world wants to be represented by the camera, just as the camera wants to represent the world – in fact the problem might be the product of both a camera and a world that are insufficiently cynical about being represented. A cynical, or inquisitive image maker is required. Second, we can come to the conclusion that the post-industrial condition of visibility does not reveal the world to us. In fact, it is increasingly apparent, if it was not before, that visibility is produced for us, and the world in turn is actively concealed by those objects that do not conform to its metrics. If it operates against the logics of photographic reproducibility or the desires of the photographic programme, an object, person or event does not exist. That this should force our hand to seek an alternative mode of representation might be obvious, though it remains largely neglected.

If this is so, might it be that our technologies and media, previously conditioned to re-present the visible world, can be put to work showing us instead the new and invisible world in its place? Can we reconfigure a notion of representation that depends less upon the immediate claim to the presence of the photograph, and one which, in its place, describes instead an attempt to see (beyond visibility itself)?

George Baker, in his ‘Abstracting Photography’, has written of the need for the photographic image to respond to the changes of our crash and post-crash economies. It must, he suggests, represent the abstract, an abstraction that is simultaneously social, economic and formal (Cotton et al. 2010). The rise of abstract photographies has coincided with the functional redundancy of analogue image – those images that operate in social and informational networks have relinquished analogue photography from the task of representing, just as painting was freed from the same task by photography after the 1820s and 1830s – though in many cases the abstraction of photography that has resulted has produced little more than a material fetishism of the analogue.

In some instances of critical photographic abstraction, artists have presented the abstract image as a new photographic realism, demonstrating how their abstractions represent the world to us. Just such an example would be the *Transparencies* of Walead Beshty, or the project *The Day Nobody Died*, by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin. But it is significant that these are, in effect, cameraless photographies – they are made of, are the consequence of, an increased awareness of the sensitivity of paper and film as substrates now technologically superceded. They have significance, but I want to ask instead how such an abstract realism might manifest itself in the act of photography with the camera, within the context of a technology that is material but also of the present.

One example is found in James Welling’s photographs of Modernist Houses. The Glass House photographs undo the rhetoric of transparency. Welling approaches Philip Johnson’s Glass House, built between 1945 and 1995, equipped with digital camera, gels, filters and sheets of Mylar and Glass. His process is both formal and improvised: set up on a tripod, his camera tethered to a laptop so as to view the image, he holds and moves gels, glass and mylar in front of the lens. Mixing materials so as render the site in vivid artificial colour, he exacerbates the reflections and surfaces of Johnson’s structure, increasing the complexity of the resulting images, so much so that they appear porous but also flat and dense. Approaching the modernist house, it seems that the landscape no longer passes through the structure so much as both landscape and structure are flattened within the surface of the image.

Welling’s approach is interesting if we remind ourselves of the significance of his subject's engagement with its forming of human subjects. International Style steel and glass modernism are perhaps one of the origins of our – historically recent – belief in transparency and visibility: it was from here that glass functions as an architectural metaphor for honesty and operational transparency. Welling himself has called Johnson’s Glass House a lens in the landscape, suggesting that, in its adoption of transparency, photography, architecture and the dissolution of a line between the private and the public, they find a meeting point. But we know that what is visible might remain limited, or may have even appeared to have dematerialized, selectively, and not for all citizens: the Modernist house appears almost empty, but this is a ruse. It asserts the absence of anything to hide. But Welling’s photographs – Mies van der rohe’s Farnsworth House, or Philip Johnson’s Glass House – place such transparency into doubt, producing opacities in objects that span the late periods of modernity. Our attention drifts towards the filtering effects of glass, the selective nature of transparency, and the concealing nature of visibility itself. It is of course the case that these structures appear transparent, and yet they remain functionally opaque, for the appearance of transparency belies the spaces of privacy concealed within. It is not a coincidence either that such transparency arises from the absence of other houses, and other people, hidden by large wooded grounds. One is hard pressed to imagine a transparency being retained in a modernist structure when it is placed in an urban centre. The phenomenon of visitors photographing from the observation tower of Herzog and De Meuron's new Tate Modern extension into the sheer glass spaces of a nearby Rogers & Partners apartment block – where some residents have complained, others have installed blinds, and Tate has installed signage urging for respectful behaviour – has seen the transparency of glass become opaque.

If the illusion of visibility is sometimes undermined, it remains a project to unearth the invisible. A different transformation of the visible takes place in Trevor Paglen’s *The Other Night Sky*. Paglen’s project tracks the passage of various military satellites in their orbits around the earth. The satellites that Paglen tracks are notionally and bureaucratically invisible and their existence is denied. They fall between the cracks of national security interests. In tracking them, Paglen turns the monochrome of the night sky into a rich painterly highway of star, satellites and orbiting traffic. In durational exposures using cameras with customized telescopic lenses and a computer-guided mechanical mount, Paglen uses the data of a satellite’s orbit to track its specific trajectory. His images therefore select and isolate one specific passage, compromising a representation of space as it appears to human sight, to allow the mechanical eye of the camera to see and function as a tracking mechanism. We are familiar with this potential operation of the camera, and yet we approach the image as an abstraction at first. In its picturing of ‘the other night sky’, and in its transformation of the monochrome of the sky into something functional and descriptive, it enacts Baker’s claim to represent the abstract, a translation that we might also begin to consider as a movement from abstraction into a modified picturing of the real.

Might we then consider these methods as tools, or levers, to amend our common conception of photography as perceived through the lens? For it seems that in Welling's making-opaque of the transparent, and Paglen's representations of the secret satellites in a form of abstract representation, we begin to re-insert into our conceptions of photography a modification of what we might call realism. This realism is a Trojan horse – not an assertion of the world or of photography as it is, but a strategy towards uncovering the covered, and covering the unnecessarily visible. It must be a photography acknowledging the respective agencies of both camera and photographer, which places the act of photography as a complex negotiation of the intent of the image maker, the technological programming and limit of the photographic apparatus, and the visibilities and invisibilities of the world as it appears and does not appear to us. It does not presuppose a harmony between camera, operator and world so much as an agonistic negotiation between three positions, none of which are neutral.

Heretofore, realism has appeared to photography as a given. It is understood, through the lazy application of indexicality, as a fact of the medium’s very mechanics. So automatically do we think of the photograph as possessing some notion of reality, that there has rarely been a discourse of realism applied to the photographic image – it spills over unevenly from literature, theatre and from painting, and especially from Marxist critiques of these forms in the 1930s. In fact, our notion of realism is so casual within photography that when I use the term we might assume that I mean simply ‘more real’: not only a reductive formulation but one that misses its full potentiality. A photographic realism, sounding as it does as an oxymoron or tautology, is in fact the reinstatement of the technical apparatus to the photographic image.

Tom McCarthy, in his recent essay for the *London Review of Books*, entitled ‘Writing machines’, has written of the troubles of what we often call ‘realism’. As McCarthy points out in his essay, when we speak about realism we are often, in fact, talking about naturalism (2014]. When I suggest that ‘this is exactly how things are, how they appear, visibly, to us’, I am not being realist, but asserting a naturalism: naturalism appears as if already formed – simply waiting for us to freeze it, like a photograph. When I use language in an apparently neutral way, I record naturalistically. And so too in this naturalistic mode, my use of the camera (or of a pencil, of language) would be simply conventional and, it might be argued, verging on the anachronistic: certainly, the world is not revealed by it. As Bertolt Brecht stated famously, ‘from the (carefully taken) photograph of a Ford factory no opinion about this factory can be deduced’ (2001: 144). Little or no context is provided by naturalistic literature or naturalistic photography (and nor is any acknowledgement of its possible failure). Such claims to the truth – if that is what we desire of the photograph – hinge upon a similar conflation. John Roberts, in his recent book *Photography and Its Violations* (2014), has claimed that, like our confusion of the terms naturalism and realism within literature, within photography realism and indexicality are often conflated: indexicality inscribes the nature of a presence, while realism is a philosophical or critical fidelity. While I wish to use realism as a more provocative tool for the understanding of the technical conditions of images than does Roberts – who seeks instead to argue for a lineage of realism emerging from the Marxian disputes around what constitutes a depiction of social reality – Roberts is helpful in stating photography’s modified relationship to truth. He states that:

The arrival of digitalization and the critical displacement of the photodocument may have further weakened the role of documentary practice as a *political culture*, but it is a mistake to assume that this announces the final demise of realism, inasmuch as there is no Realism *to* supersede. That is, under the aegis of documentary practice, realism – understood as the truth-claims of the photographic index – did not once exist in all its political glory and then, with the advent of the index’s would-be displacement under digitalization, come to a sorry close. This is because (1) the indexicality of the photodocument and realism as an epistemological category are not the same thing, and (2) digitalization is itself a form of displaced or *secondary* form of, indexicality. (Roberts 2014: 65, original emphasis)

While conventional notions of objective truth might be undone by the digital file and its possible modifications – and Roberts is by no means alone in comparing the malleability of a digital file to a painted or computer-generated image (what he classifies as a secondary index) – such claims for the digital does not in any way diminish the possibility of realism: This is because Roberts seeks no longer any incontrovertible truth in the image by itself, and in its place proposes a discursive space based upon testimony, a term he borrows from Paul Ricoeur, citing him:

It is before someone that the witness testifies to the reality of some scene of which he was part of the audience, perhaps as actor or victim, yet in the moment of testifying, he is in the position of a third-position observer with regard to all the protagonists of the action. This dialogical structure immediately makes clear the dimension of trust involved; the witness asks to be believed. He does not limit himself to saying ‘I was there,’ he adds ‘believe me’. (Roberts 2014: 65)

No longer is presence adequate to our notion of realism. The image becomes a discursive object, and in that discursivity it no longer proclaims the ‘I was there’ we associate with photography so conclusively. In its place, the image constructs not an image of the world but a model, one that can be proposed, queried and seen in context: it represents and participates in the world, rather than extracting it from it. Visibility is also quashed by this notion: the testimony is not delivered to the eyes, but to the mind and the body. In its no longer naturalistic imaging of the event it becomes unnecessarily to have only seen, or to have only been made available to vision. A sound, a touch, a sensation becomes equally telling.

The research organization Forensic Architecture explores the gaps between images. It produces analytical evidence to participate in the production of both political and juridical facts, relating to areas of conflict and sites of humanitarian crises. Using archaeological and forensic tools first developed to generate evidence and demonstrate the course of decades-old war crimes (see Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman’s *Mengele’s Skull*) (Keenan and Weizman 2012), Forensic Architecture has merged forensic procedures with new combinations of image sources and data analysis tools, to reveal how buildings both produce and bear the scars of control, and how these affect human subjects. Weizman describes this process as expanding the juridical process so that objects themselves can be sources of information and effectively placed within the context of a trial. One project, entitled *A Drone Strike in Miranshah: Investigating Video Testimony*, exhibited in the 2015–16 exhibition *Images of Conviction: The Construction of Visual Evidence* assembles uploaded civilian photographic and video recordings to produce real-time 3D-mapped and geo-tagged verifications of drone attacks in Palestine (Dufour 2015). Forensic Architecture projects counter government accusations of digital manipulation – an open but hard-to-refute claim made by numerous government forces – and strategies of hiding or concealing, by using multiple images as an accumulation of information that can be abstractly mapped. In using a combination of archaeological, forensic and photographic tools, Forensic Architectures demonstrates new expanded strategies of documentary practice, interlinking the documentary mode of ‘witnessing’ with analytical research, while providing real, juridical evidence.

*Saydnaya: Inside a Syrian Torture Prison* begins, however, at the very limit of photographic evidence. Saydnaya Prison is located 25km north of Damascus in Syria, and has been the site of civilian tortures since 2011. The prison remains out of view, however: a single satellite image reveals nothing of what happens inside, and no images are known to exist of the site (in part because no independent visitors have been permitted to visit). The operators of Saydnaya have restricted all acts of photography to conceal any disclosure of the treatment of inmates, a strategy that is further facilitated by the conditions in which prisoners are held and moved around the site in continual darkness.

Without even a partial photographic record, *Inside a Syrian Torture Prison* nevertheless constructs a new body of imagery to make Saydnaya visible. The project responds to the difficulties of obtaining photographic documents by re-establishing the value of human experience as a source of evidence and information, advanced by a forensic focus upon detail. As a re-construction based around the oral accounts of ex-prisoners – seen through an interactive model of the prison interspersed with interview extracts and video footage of the model’s assembly – it becomes clear that the body and mind witness beyond the purely narrative account of the subject. The body and mind trace the site, and are imprinted with it. Extensive interviews, where the prison structure and operations are discussed, compared and mapped with architects, form a picture of the building. But with darkened conditions as standard, information is not taken from general or emotive impressions but from the specific relationships of the body to those architectures, in relation to the size and textures of cells, and the architectural particularities of the site. In one interview, a man recalls a hatch that corresponds to the size of his skull (through which the inmate was forced to insert his head, sideways, so as to be beaten). The space, in turn, can be measured in reverse, its position towards the floor located by the bodily memory of the witness. Each body maintains the physical residue of the architecture, but the senses similarly maintain a sense of space: the material properties of spaces were reconstructed through acoustic modelling.

Forensic Architecture’s account of Saydnaya begins with an outline shell, but populates the prison with intense details emerging from the human subject. Sense experience is transformed into visible mappings of the site. And temporarily without photographic input, the forensic reconstruction of site and experience re-situates the human agent as a reliable, in fact, valuable witness. Photography could learn from such methods, progressing beyond a notion of fact, or indexicality, to one of testimony for its claim to relevance in the world. If we find ourselves blinded by our dependence upon the image, we find in the human who testifies a key.

The very possibility of a notion of realism for photography is in the making visible of that which needs to be seen, and not the state of visibility itself. But while a critical realism for photography assumes that photography will not automatically show this reality to us, we must do more than simply wield the camera at something we select. We must work in tandem with photography and the limits and capabilities of its sight, working with it and against it at the same time, doing likewise with a world that has in turn been shaped so as to be constantly photographed. We might label this new method a sceptical realism, as we have seen that our predilection for visible presupposes has begun to condition our actions in the world. The means towards this new realism has been in places a representation of the abstract, but it is primarily in a participating, acting photography, which shifts and manoeuvres in order to see. Perhaps we need the world to be rendered opaque to us again for this to be possible.

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**Contributor details**

Duncan Wooldridge is an artist, writer and curator. He is the course director of BA (Hons) Photography at Camberwell College of Arts, University of the Arts London (UAL). His research interests include the expanded field of photographic practice in contemporary art after 1965, the production of 'anti-photographies' in Italy, Japan and the United Kingdom in the 1970s, and the notion of the experimentation, as a tool to reframe the ontology of the photographic act. He is the curator of the exhibitions *Anti-Photography* (2011, Focal Point Gallery) and *John Hilliard: Not Black and White* (2014, Richard Saltoun).

Contact:

Duncan Wooldridge

Course Director, BA (Hons) Photography

Camberwell College of Arts,

45-65 Peckham Road,

London,

SE15 4BJ

United Kingdom

E-mail: [d.wooldridge@camberwell.arts.ac.uk](mailto:d.wooldridge@camberwell.arts.ac.uk)