

photocommunication notes

A famous director when asked to act is said to have replied that he preferred being behind the camera instead of being on the 'other' side. One also hears of actors who turn directors. It appears that there is something special about being behind the camera instead of being in front of it! This exercise invites a reflection on photography practices that we often take for granted. Armed with a camera our impulse is to go around "shooting" or "snapping up" the interesting shot or the fleeting moment. If one pauses to examine this it appears that we derive a lot of pleasure from capturing an instant of time and a rectangle of space - which would change forever in case we had not pressed the shutter and frozen it on light sensitive film or on the digital memory of charged coupled capacitors.

The gesture is quaint. To derive pleasure from cutting out a rectangle from a universe that stretches lazily across light years, is perhaps the small joys of being human! Surely, nature with its tremendous creativity must look upon photographers out to map her with a benevolent and kindly air - similar in some sense perhaps to the happy indifference with which a beautiful model struts about in front of the lens of a fashion photographer. It might yield some valuable insights if one paused to reflect upon our responses to beauty. Beauty appears to be intoxicating - both to the one that possesses it and the one who is moved by it; though anyone who has sought to capture beauty and contain it - whether it is with words or images or with any other kind of container, knows that it is a futile gesture. There is something about beauty that spills over the borders of infinities. And yet as writers or photographers we are constantly in pursuit of this elusive substance.

At times it is not beauty, but horror that drives the photographer to jab the shutter. There are several images in the banks of photography that speak of this - there is the image of children away running naked from a napalm attack; there are the haunting eyes of an Afghan refugee staring at the world from the cover of the National Geographic issue; there is that image of a child being buried in the aftermath of the Bhopal Gas tragedy. In a less dramatic sense there are images of the poor and the forgotten from some of India's most neglected districts; there are images of the old, the decaying and the abandoned in an old age home.

There are those who disapprove of photographing misery; suggesting that such a photographer becomes like a vulture or a parasite who live-off the plight of the miserable. There are those who defend such encroachments as invaluable evidence of societal indifference. Clearly the relationship between the one in front of the lens and the one behind it, is far from simple.

Heisenberg's uncertainty principle in quantum physics suggests that the very act of observation changes that which is observed. Stated simplistically, the act of observation requires us to impinge on the observed and this changes what we set out to observe. If you have sought to photograph people as they appear in their unguarded moments, you must have realized that this is not easy. The instant you take out the camera, the expression that you sought to capture disappears! And thus, manufacturers equipped the photographer with telephoto lenses and soon there was a whole new movement called "candid camera." Clearly, a telephoto lens is a voyeuristic tool and yet this does not seem to deter the determined photographer. Could the intentions (or the lack of it) absolve the photographer? This exercise is an opportunity to examine some of these issues and come to your understanding of where you choose to situate yourself in this regard.

Our eyes are the windows that link our inner worlds to the world that is outside. We often regard ourselves as something that are bounded by our bodies. Therefore the moment we open our eyes we are in a relationship with the 'other.' Is it possible for the self to be comfortable with the other? It appears that in India, most people are actually delighted to pose for a photograph. The more individualistic West, is far more guarded looks upon an infringement of private space as uncouth. However, this stereotype (like most stereotypes) conceals more than it reveals. Try walking in with a camera into the underground mafia's den; or for that matter into a construction site that is not even flouting safety norms; and you will realize why the camera becomes a metaphor of power. This exercise is an invitation for exploring the politics of the camera.

On another note, one may choose a subject that is fascinating. Perhaps the source for fascination is

because of the 'other' being so different from one's self - and the process of engaging with the other is to understand the nature of the relationship between the photographer and the photographed. Not as straightforward as the previous tasks, this exercise requires contemplation. You might wish to spend some time looking at yourself and how you view yourself in relationship to the world around. You might find writing a diary of sorts as a useful aid in this regard. This exercise, unlike the very first one that required you to explore yourself - asks of you to spell out your relationship with the world around - with the 'other.'

Additional Reading

Ways of Seeing, John Berger

On Photography, Susan Sontag

Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes

The Indians, Sudhir and Katharina Kakar

Art India

Better Photography, Sadanad Menon

1. Development of photography, Glassplates, Daguerrotypes, Camera Obscura, Camera Lucida, Development of Lenses, Point and Shoot Cameras, Lenses, Twin Lens Reflex, SLR, Digital Cameras.
2. Roland Barthes 'Mother' and Camera Lucida
3. Raja Ravi Verma
4. Susan Sontag and 9/11.
5. P. Sainath
6. Raghu Rai's Bhopal, Calcutta, Varanasi and Taj
7. Nasreen Mohamedi
8. National Geographic Cover
9. Napalm attack, Frank Capa
10. Photography: Crisis or celebration? Flickr, Photocritique

Photography was earlier looked down upon by artists in India or viewed as an adjunct practice in the service of their main work. The miniaturization and user-friendliness of digital technologies have changed this. Broota's montages anticipate the layers of photoshop.

Pushpamala's works may appear as a part of the banality that has become an industry of post-colonial criticism. She seeks to subvert the studio photograph - a colonial accompaniment into India. A self-conscious, dramatized cultural performance. The role played by photography in the construction of Otherness as a part of the colonial enterprise. Appropriating colonial photography in a tongue-in-cheek manner. Interesting counter-point to Pushpamala's practice is the work of the writer and photo-journalist P. Sainath. Travels widely in rural India. Exhibits in makeshift spaces. Opened up a new discursive space for the photograph. His photographs are what Arjun Appadurai calls a "community of sentiment". Sainath negates Sontag's acerbic observation that when photojournalists report that there was nothing to photograph, what they usually means is that there was nothing terrible to photograph. Sainath chooses to valorize invisible labour and survivors of calamities. His photographs of marginalized communities titled, "Visible Work, Invisible Women" have been displayed in spaces belonging to the rural communities he documents, universities, and college as well as mainstream galleries.

Documenting the families of those farmers who have committed suicide-has an interesting use of a photograph within a photograph - the image of the dead reverentially cradled in the lap of a surviving relative.

These poignant posed photographs have none of the violence that normally accompanies the media specialization of private grief.

Probir Gupta makes use of photographs in his installations. To experience the interior of the body through CT scans, The X-Rays, the ultrasound, to experience the internal body externalized is a phenomena peculiar to our times. Gupta uses medical imaging in his works.

Using 'found objects' - photos from a demolished 'illegal' building with X-Ray images Gupta investigates our relationship with the city classified into legal and illegal entities.

David De Souza airs his views on processes that push and pull photography. In India today, as in the West it is common practice for painters to use photographs or photographic processes. Has photography in India allowed itself to be influenced by other art forms - in a reverse osmosis?

The stratification of photographers in India- fashion at top, industrial at the bottom-the West had Anne Leibowitz but in India the portraitist were studio photographers who hung a white curtain behind you

if you wanted a Saudi visa or a demat account; or a red one if it was for a US visa. Filmstars celebrities in India who do not age. Avedon, Snowdon, Lichfield and Lachapelle who captured stars in a variety of contexts.

Lack of originality and commitment are serious defects seen in the works of many Indian contemporary photographers. Many successful Indian photographers have a slick, technically correct approach to reproduction. Only a few like Raghubir Singh, Raghu Rai, Ashvin Mehta and Raghu Rai and Dayanita Singh have found their way out.

Serious lack of educational facilities. Shari Academy - Girsish Mistry. NCPA Piramal Gallery is the only Gallery. The vinyl medium; the film hoarding. The photographers who get no attention are the wedding photographers churning out 5x7 in prints on the Noritsu machines and PowerPoint DVDs of Raju weds Rani. The D word is out. Earlier art directors insisted on large format cameras. Today it is the latest digital technology. Despite Photoshop there has been no significant jump in creativity.

10. Reading Gupta's account of travelling to China, leading a gay life, having AIDS, thinking he would die, being seriously ill and recovering, coming to Delhi and speaking of Mister Malhotra's Party, the account has the note of coming to terms with one's sexuality. This touchy issue plagues adults all over the world. To come to terms with one's animality. People adopt different postures. Some settle down into a contented sexual life in marriage. Others take recourse to extr-marital relationships (affairs- as they are pronounced with a more than a hint of sarcasm by those not have come to terms or so they believe-sarcasm is a dead giveaway of insecurity). The resolution of sexuality is one of the greatest transcendence. It leads to a relaxed soul and relaxation is a surer sign of transcendence than any of the more solemn posturings. The notion of a secret society within a city was interesting. Why is Gupta telling us of the secret though? Is it a confessional of sorts? Is he still not perfectly at ease with his alternate sexuality? How can he be, when the world is full of people grappling with moral issues. From this emerges an earlier concern of mine of the world as souls trying to work out their karmas.

Rashid Rana's large sized photographs. What appears like a choppy sea with tiny medieval ships is actually man-made waste from Lahore. Meeting Point in which two planes projected on adjoining walls appear to be heading for a mid-air collision, till they retrace their paths, as if hoping to reverse time. In the post 9/11 scenario these videos effectively framed the tension produced by the threat of possible confrontations. Ten Differences (2004); Departure Lounge (2006). Deliberate rupture between the larger picture and the smaller images. Burqa-clad woman using pornographic photos.

Nasreen Mohammadi's B/W photographs provide an insight into her carefully controlled pen and ink drawings.

"The very question of whether photography is or is not art is essentially a misleading one. Although photography generates works that can be called art - it requires subjectivity. Like language it is a medium in which works of art are made. Susan Sontag.

It is remarkable the way Nm's photography provide insights into her formal aesthetic-an aesthetic that was fairly unusual in its time. Stark line drawings with an absence of colour and figurative elements - an emerging alternative modernism

Malaysian Photographers-Sulu Stories Yee-I-Lann

The photographer has to have a mission for himself or herself. When I realized that I did not have to take photographs for others, that I can take pictures only for myself and my friends, I felt liberated. In Delhi, in my house, I have a kitchen museum. Instead of masalas in jars there are these black notebooks - that are really accordion fold-outs- they string together moments that I have shared with a person. I make two copies - one stays in the museum - the other I send to the person. Three influences - her mother, Nony Singh, (she went to NID), Zakir Hussain, and Saligao - the wonderful village in Goa where she lives.

