Pursuing the archiving of history

Through the works of objectivist photographers, Bernd and Hilla Becher and Robert Polidori, this paper looks into how historical narrative is achieved.

Esmeralda Muñoz-Torrero
MA DIGITAL ART
2009
Abstract

Within my practice I am attempting to represent the industrial legacy of the 19th and early 20th centuries using photography as a key instrument of my methodology.

In my artistic research I am observing the implications that come with using the medium of photography as opposed to others - such us moving image - to document my chosen subject. I will investigate how photography works as a historical document and how by tracing its past functions we can gain an understanding of its contemporary role and the validity of it being my chosen methodology.

Nowadays with the ever-constant changes of technology and digital imaging, the role of photography as a narrative has been questioned. The advances of digital imaging have meant that the object world can be reassembled in a computer in the shape of a photograph. This image making practice may seem to signal the end of photography as narrative. How can we still claim that photography is a valid record of our visible world? I will explore how photography has come to be considered an indexical sign and how effectively it communicates its meaning through approach and context, reactivating our memory function.

I will use this essay to attempt to trace the use of photography as a historical document by taking a look at some of the written theories that define traditional photography as well as looking at practitioners that bring us near the objectivism of this medium employing, as my main example, the work of Bernd and Hilla Becker. I will further investigate the contemporary use of “late photography”, images that have been captured after the event has taken place, through the work of Robert Polidori. Both these practices are not the stereotypical photojournalism, they do not deal with war photography, for example, but they are two fine examples, from different times in photography’s history, that share a documentary methodology. Their field of enquiry, methodology and subject matter are closer related to my own work.

With the investigation of these practices I will attempt to prove that photography, traditional or digital, has an affirming place in the narrative of our current times, noting that photography is much more than the technology used in its creation. It is still able to provide us with an understanding of ‘what has been’ by relying on its indexical nature, its methodology and viewing context, for it is a practice that stems from our very social and cultural roots, one that is embedded in history and human endeavour.
An introduction

We are living in a technological era that has witnessed the emergence of digital photography. Critics have raised the question about the impact of digital photography on the medium’s credibility and its ability to communicate meaning. Digital imaging allows image fragments from different sources to be combined without leaving a trace. By building an image in this manner the concept of photographs being a report on nature, a medium to document and remember, is destabilized. A notorious early example of manipulation could be found in the National Geographic magazine (February 1982) where a photograph of the pyramids was manipulated so they all fitted neatly on the cover. According to Mitchell (1992), continuous image manipulation brings the deconstructing of the singular fixed image, breaking its connection with traditional photography. The development of digital imaging has meant that the traditional certainties photography offered have been subverted. This argument fits in with the postmodern theories by which any claim to be able to conceive the significance of representations by reference to some deeper level of meaning is seen as an illusion, therefore any claim of photographic dialogue with the world is an illusion. Kember (1996) also discusses the impact of digital photography with emphasis on the argument of photograph as ‘truth’. She believes that there has been a change in the relationship between the subject and the object. She criticizes the idea of a photograph being an index to the real world, stating that our perception of the photographic ‘truth’ is based on faith because it is placed in a real located ultimately in our own interior worlds rather than in an exterior one. Has photography lost its documenting power? In another level, Martin Lister (1995) argued that the differences between digital and mechanical photography have been over–emphasised and he proposes that photography should be looked at within a historical and cultural context.

Does the technological difference matter? Photography has been known as a descriptive medium. Ronald Barthes, in his book Camera Lucida (1981), talked about looking at pictures without taking interest in their way of production, he was interested in their meaning, reflecting on the felt experience of images. In this way we are called to think about the strength of the human values that direct our use of either process.

‘Social meanings and their perception are not fully determined by the technologies used in their production but rather are circumscribed both by wider hegemonic ideological practices and by the practices and traditions of those who oppose them.’ (Martha Rosler, 1991)
It will be worthwhile, then, to see how photography’s practices and traditions have contributed to the role of the image as a historical document, giving image archives a firm, culturally embedded, assertion that ‘this has been’ by simply confirming the existence of what is shown in them.

From its beginnings, photography was seen as a technique for reproduction. It produced images that were considered historical documents, images taken of ‘real’ history by the means of its mechanism. This was endorsed by the positivist’s rationale, proposing that knowledge can be secured only through direct observation. In a photograph the visible is captured and time is halted. The existence of the visible world is attested; ‘every photograph is a certificate of presence’ (Barthes 1981). In the Victorian era technological advances lead to a rapid industrial transformation of society, time seemed to be accelerating. A new historical consciousness was developed and the great public museums emerged. Institutions were dedicated to collecting and displaying objects that had scientific or historical value. In this context, the camera responded to the growing demand of recording the physical world.

Approximately nineteen years after the introduction of the first practical photographic process, Nadar (1820-1910) perfected the technique of using glass negatives and albumen printing paper. He was described as a tireless innovator and perhaps the first documenter of ‘star culture’ of his time. Within his list of achievements, he embarked upon underground photography in artificial light, producing a thorough document comprising 100 pictures of the catacombs and sewers of Paris. Another of his achievements was to capture the first-ever aerial photograph from a balloon tethered over the Bievre Valley in 1858. He remains a crucial figure in the history of photography and his documentary work is considered a great legacy.
In 1855 an exhibition opened in Pall Mall East, London consisting of 312 photographs taken in the Crimea by Roger Fenton. This was the first time photographs of war were exhibited as a historical documentary; an early example of how photography offered visual history to the general public in which the solidity of photography’s indexical nature was overriding that of the written word. The function of photography as a means of documenting was emphasised by the fact that the catalogue of this exhibition defined the prints as ‘historical portraits’. This contributed to the endorsement of photography’s narrative power.

In the late 1850s the city of Paris commissioned Charles Marville (1816-1879), a photographer whose background was in illustration, to document the ancient quarters of the city before encroaching urban modernization changed them forever. Collaborating with architects such as Paul Abadie, he photographed the different stages of construction or of restoration of civil and religious monuments. Marville assembled an extensive archive of the buildings, streets and parks, often presenting two views of his motifs from different angles. This comparative portrayal of different objects on a clearly defined topic can be interpreted as an early form of typological classification; the photographic work had a methodical approach that implied the ability of the camera to document our environment in an objective manner. At the time, photography was seen not as an artistic medium but as an objective and scientific tool of recording. For this body of work, Marville was named official photographer of Paris in 1862.

Another example of a photographer striving to give weight to the ‘truthful’ nature of photographic image capturing was Peter Henry Emerson (1856-1936). Emerson left his career as a doctor to dedicate himself to photography. He brought a new approach to photography, he believed in the
objectivity of photography, coming from a scientific background and basing his argument in the research of Von Helmholtz regarding the characteristics of human vision. He believed that a photograph should represent as accurately as possible our visual perception of a scene. In 1889 he wrote ‘Naturalistic Photography for Students of Art’. For Emerson ‘naturalistic’ described how by following a set of rules photography could mimic the eye’s way of seeing. His technique consisted of producing a single shot where the perspective was rendered as real by capturing the correct amount of detail; so one area of the photograph had sharp focus whilst the remainder was left out of focus. Our peripheral vision has much less accuracy than a sharp focused image, therefore our experience of the moment is very different to that which is captured in a sharp photograph. Emerson believed in the artistic representation of truth, which in itself is a contradiction due to the photographer’s applied subjectivism, and at the same time he made a scientific remark on how our visual perception works, that reminds us that it is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world.

From all these early examples of the role of photography in the Victorian times, we can see how the concept of photography as an index to the real world is being affirmed by its historical application. The notion that photography could be understood as an objective medium was later taken on board by critics such as Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) and Andre Bazin (1918-1958). In 1935 Walter Benjamin wrote about photography being a mechanical process that captures reality. In his essay, the photographic camera was described as an invention that transformed the nature of art. This new media brought us to see life documented in a new way with the use of techniques such as slow motion and close-ups giving us a new scientific look into human life. Benjamin refers to photography as being a medium for establishing evidence, also describing photographs as a standard evidence for historical occurrences.

In a similar tone André Bazin (1967) in 1943 pointed out that the photographic lens, which is considered as the basis of photography, is in French called ‘objectif’ and the objectivity of the photographic camera is directly related with the fact that it can reproduce images with a limited amount of human intervention in comparison to other ‘traditional’ arts such as painting. The camera seems to offer an accuracy and objectivity that creates a feeling of certainty about what it captures.

‘In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction’ (Andre Bazin, The Ontology of the Photographic Image p.8)
From this perspective, we can see how photography in the beginning was considered to be a practice that limited the human artistic input in comparison to other visual arts, and therefore was referred as being a source of evidence, an objective representation of the visible world. A good mechanism to record history. Photography became a means of producing an archive on a scale and rhythm in accord with the demands of the times in the industrial revolution.

Documenting...

There are many theories and examples that we can contemplate when talking about photography being a historical document. As history of photography evolved we can see how different schools of thought developed but we can also see how, departing from my earlier examples, similar concepts and practices have survived and have carried similar values arguing photography’s role as a documenting medium. The influences of an earlier photographic objectivist approach can be seen in the works of Bernd and Hilla Becher and the work of Robert Polidori.

Bernd and Hilla Becher in their lifetime project (1959 onwards) documented classical industrial architecture in Europe and North America. They chose to photograph buildings and constructions whose development followed a historical thread and also represented the various technical achievements of their time. These constructions bore witness to their time architecturally, and this architecture was wholly related to the thinking behind an industrial economy. They were buildings that talked of a past age and they would mostly be demolished.

Water Tower, Dorstfeld district, Dortmund, Germany, 1965
This type of endeavour has been observed from the nineteenth century. Visual representations of buildings as a form of protecting them against oblivion, where taken into account before legal acts created institutions involved in the preserving of historical heritage. The ease of photographic reproduction allowed it to reach wider groups of recipients, photographs were collected and they functioned as home visual encyclopedias. Many buildings that were immortalized in photographs gained special status in common conscience and social identity. By engaging in this photographic project, Bernd and Hilla Becher revalidated the vision of Sir Frederick Pollock on photography’s role; he thought that the camera would be history’s saviour.

In his inaugural Presidential address to the Photographic Society of London in 1855, he said:

‘The varied objects to which photography can address itself, its power of rendering permanent that which appears to be fleeting as the shadows that go across the dial, the power that it possesses of giving fixedness to instantaneous objects, are for purpose of history…a matter of the deepest importance. It is not too much to say that no individual—not merely individual man, but no individual substance, no individual matter, nothing that is extraordinary in art, that is celebrated in architecture, that is calculated to excite the admiration of those who behold I, need now perish, but may be rendered immortal by the assistance of Photography’ (Quoted on S. Mcquire 1998: p.124)

From the 18th century there was a tradition of anonymous industrial photography, companies used to commission photographers to record the current state of technology. Their pictures followed strict guidelines on how to produce a faithful representation, no embellishment was used. Also, in the 1920s, photographers such as Renger-Patzsch established their practice in Germany following an objective approach. Renger-Patzsch’s work was encompassed in the New Objectivity movement, characterised by a detached, almost scientific objectivity and precise attention to detail.

Following these traditions, when Bernd and Hilla Becher started to compile their photographic documentation of industrial buildings they decided to reject photographic manipulation. As Martha Rosler pointed out, it is important that we understand the fact that the straight photography of documentary and journalism is a genre. It has its own history, politics, and institutional frameworks that contribute to its special, if disputable, authority. The term ‘straight photography’ designates a way of making photographs in which, as a matter of principle, manipulation is avoided. It does not mean that the image is not the result of intention and shaping by the photographer. The very choice to work in this way is itself the outcome of working with ideas and making choices within a wider set of possibilities.
The Bechers chose this way of photographing because they wanted the buildings to speak for themselves which is an objectivist attitude although that is far from affirming that they are representing the truth. As Barthes (1979) observes, a photograph’s certainty is in the awareness that the recording of the referent is proof of its existence. What is seen has existed, rather than a certainty which dealt with either the exactitude and perfect resemblance of the referents, or even their position in time or place.

The Bechers referent was the external form of industrial architecture, they developed an artistic style that was methodical and precise. This style not only brought us visual documentation but it also proposed a specific visual grammar. In their criteria of selection, as well as formal aesthetics, they choose constructions that could be portrayed in the original context in which they functioned. Once the pictures were taken they were then classified. The photographic prints where ordered to form object families first by functionality and structural properties, then the material used and the shape, and then following different sub-types. By putting the images next to each other the rhetoric of a document was reinforced. The images were composed into typologies.

Their documentary photography was exhibited in museums and galleries from as early as 1963, making their oeuvre accessible to a broader segment of the general public. Showing their work in galleries allowed for images to engage in a narrative, images were selected and arranged in thematic areas. Their pictures always had specific information about their referent. In general, all exhibitions include written text that accompanies the work in the form of titles, work information, catalogues, etc., and these factors add to the contextualization of the images, giving them solidity as historical documents. Green-Lewis argues that giving the images a
name isolates them from the others, giving them gravity and authority, the narrative is followed by their arrangement, in some way the space in between frames in an exhibition functions the same as the space on a written sentence. Also the frame endows a photograph with significance, it determines how its contents are read by identifying them as being in some way related. John Tagg (1979) talks about exhibitions being a map, they set values to a terrain by separation, definition and description marking the significant points and omitting others. His analogy focuses on the relationship between truth and an exhibition. A map is normally received as a truthful indicator of the land we negotiate, it may be more or less reliable, but we are predisposed to accept it as true. Bernd and Hilla Becher's photographs were shown in exhibitions as well as catalogues. By presenting them in this cohesive manner they convey more than a view of the index of industrial buildings. In this way these unnamed edifices are given the opportunity to be the focus of broad public attention, they have been given a context that affirms their position in historic documentation.

Another example of historic photographic documentation represented in museums can be seen in the work of Robert Polidori and his series of ‘New Orleans After the Flood’, a solemn photographic document on a ravaged city that follows his previous work on an abandoned Pripyat after the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear plant and the ruined homes of Havana, Cuba.

In 2006 Polidori started photographing New Orleans after hurricane Katrina struck. His work was as methodical as a surveyor, advancing as the water retreated and the clean up began. He restlessly labored over many months to capture on film the aftermath of this natural disaster and he amassed a pictorial inventory of the city’s shattered architecture. Some buildings were documented in multiple views; each shot is annotated with a street address. In this respect Polidori took a very similar approach to his work to that of the Bechers. He photographed in natural light using long exposures creating an artistic style that was methodical and precise. It remind us of the rudiments
of a photographic document, understood as a transparent medium of information, being focused pictures, keeping scale and proportion, showing structures, materials, distinguishing clearance and tonal values. This way the images assume an aesthetic of utility closer to forensic photography than traditional photojournalism. Polidori himself used this tone as he talked about his work; he dealt with a city like a ‘decomposing body’. When the photographer started his work New Orleans was still under water, there was no electricity and the high temperatures made it smell putrid.

Geoffrey Batchen talks about the attitude of the documentarian, which consists of an acute observation of reality taking into account its different aspects, such as the social and cultural aspects. This approach allows a discourse between knowledge, memory and history (Batchen 2001). Looking at documentary this way we can see the part played by the photographer whose task is to construct an archive, photography being a tool with which the significance of a place that has gone through drastic changes can be recorded and thus become a starting point for the memory to work. Architecture can stimulate the capacity to remember, reviving memory through emotions. Polidori lived in New Orleans as a teenager; this personal experience increased the necessity to record a picture of the changed city. The photographer was looking for its ‘authentic’ matter, primarily in the devastated buildings of the city, places where the city’s history had accumulated. By photographing these places he reproduced the archive structure.

‘Transcending the limits of pure architectural photography, Polidori’s images record a visual citation of both past and present, an extraordinary invocation of history and modernity within the confines of a single frame’. (Julie Castellano 2006)
Because the referents in Polidori’s pictures are ruins they became a signifier of the memorable, providing us with a relationship between memory and history. Ruins are an emblem of transition, a sign of the course of history. Polidori’s images are a material sign of the traumatic events occurred in New Orleans, the value of loss creates the archive desire; it creates the need for recording history. In this context we can make a direct link to the work of Bern and Hilda Becher and their endeavor to record industrial edifices that were mostly due to be destroyed. Jacques Derrida wrote ‘There would indeed be no archive desire without the radical finitude, without the possibility of a forgetfulness which does not limit itself to repression.’ (Derrida 1995: 19).

In our modern communities, there is a acceptance of memory and common identity being connected to the existence of architecture, which creates an array of dependencies. Ruskin (1849) wrote, ‘we can live without architecture, but we cannot remember without it’. He interpreted that through architecture we maintain a relationship with the past and that historical urban fabric influences our identity as it becomes part of our existence.

Polidory is amongst a few other photographers, such as Sophie Ristelhueber (known for her series ‘Fait’, illustrating Kuwait after the gulf war) and Joel Meyerowitz (series ‘Reflections on Ground Zero’, New York after the 9/11 attack), whose work is mostly characterized by the recording of events after they have happened. David Campany refers their style as ‘late photography’, the photograph of the aftermath. He examines the role of photography in our current time; he implies that ‘late photography’ is a new form of photojournalism. Photojournalism has evolved from the times when war photographers went out in the battle fields, the Gulf War being a turning point were photographers stopped being involved. Photojournalism has diversified in the new technological environment. Sometimes documentary photography is found as part of a new medium, such as the web where it is blended with other forms of media like audio, text, video and databases; other times, as it happens with ‘late photography’, it results being exhibited in museums or galleries. It is a current dialogue with documentary; by having its outlets in museums, galleries and books it offers a reflection on the photograph as evidence. It allows us to see the indexical nature of the image and provides us with a narrative, a narrative that is historically charged, as it is in the case with J Meyerowitz ‘Reflections on Ground Zero’ series, where the recording of these events was commissioned by the Museum of the City of New York to be the ‘official’ images of the scene for posterity.
‘The contemporary stockpiling of images to ward off loss—of species, of habitat, of culture, of the past in general—registers the acute anxiety affecting memory in the present. Where the nineteenth century invented history, late twentieth-century imagination is gripped by melancholy. Nostalgic visions of the past as a time of lost innocence have proliferated in the cold light of social dysfunctions and environmental destruction which diminish the allure of progress. Often what photographs, films or video recordings preserve today is merely this sense of irredeemable loss’. (Scott McQuire, 1998)

Campany argues the fact that photography’s privileged status to represent history is due to a certain nostalgia for a time before new media, when photography was invested with a power to convey memory. He makes a comparison between photography and moving image referring to the feeling of ‘pastness’ that photography presents us when in contrast to the feeling of ‘presentness’ of the moving image. In moving image the use of freeze frame is commonly used to evoke the memorable. This asserts the tenet that a photograph and its simplicity, in a world of moving image where there is a sheer amount of information, can in some manner relate to the process of our memory, photography being given a memory function with a wish that its muteness will appear to be uncontaminated and serve as a memory trigger.

‘While its (photography) privileged status may be imagined to stem from a natural capacity to condense and simplify things, the effects of the still image derive much more from its capacity to remain radically open, radically laconic. It is not that a photograph says a thousand words, rather that a thousand words can be said about it.’ (David Campany, 2003)

Polidori’s pictures represent an account of not only the physical but also the psychological space of the city, a space that has been tragically transformed. In his work time, memory and place have been formed as an archive.

**Conclusion**

Throughout history photographers have been documenting our rapidly changing environment. Photography has offered an opportunity to arrest time and capture the visual world. The documentary work of early photographers was showed in museums, galleries and archives. Their work was perceived as visual history, an index to the real world. This indexicality defined by Barthes as the ‘photographic referent’ is what has compelled us to believe in the value of the image as a historical document.
'I call photographic referent not the optionally real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph.' Barthes (1981, p76)

Despite concerns about the technological and signifying differences between chemical and digital photography, contemporary responses to the reality of an image tend to be guided not by the image itself, but by assumptions derived from the context on which they are viewed. Museums and archives were mostly the context for the above examples. These are not only veritable spaces, they are above all discursive spaces, which provide photography with form and meaning.

The photographic practices of Bernd and Hilla Becher and Robert Polidori are a testimony of personal pursuits of archiving history. Their aim is not to represent the ‘truth’ but to raise awareness of ‘what has been’. The intention of the photographers is visible; they follow an objectivist attitude which allows the referents to speak for themselves. It could be argued that there are two different discourses, which photography has always tried to bridge, one of science and one of art, but photography should not be interpreted as a virtuous medium. Rather the chosen approach of the photographers should provide us with the rhetoric of the document.

Although the Becher’s and Polidory’s photographs don’t represent the vast and varied scale of contemporary photography, they are examples of photographs with a shared methodology that exist within a new technological environment. Their weight as historical witnesses relies on the effectiveness of their communication, which is supported not only by the historical nature of photographs as indexical signs but also by the methodological approach in their production, their viewing context and most of all their ability to direct our attention to time and memory and spaces transformed by the passing of time.

Afterthought...

The investigation of these practitioners has led me to reflect upon my practice and how it relates to them. Employing photography as my methodology I will attempt to capture some of what remains from the functional architecture of the industrial era. The weight of photography as a visual history can be observed not only in its history as an indexical sign but also in the influence that the still image has on moving image documentary; the use of freeze frame emphasizes the ‘pastness’ of the ‘still’ and creates a signifier of the memorable.
Photojournalism has been the general terminology employed for documentary photography. The context in which this genre of photography is presented is quite diverse but I chose to focus on the gallery and museum, as it is the way I would like my work to be shown. The cognition of the importance of context, which emphasizes the relationship between the object and the subject, has assured my thoughts about how an archive of pictures shown in a gallery context is fully provided with discourse.

I have engaged in a fair amount of practical research to inform my approach to my chosen subject, this has led me to pick the Bechers and Polidori as my main two examples considering their methodology being related to my own. Observing their practices, the importance of the photographers approach in the narrative of the work has been proven essential. Applying a consistent approach, such as the Bechers and Polidori, I will attempt to capture a visual reference to the past and the present recalling history and the present times.

Bibliography

BOOKS


• Wells, Liz (2008), *The photography reader*, Oxon: Routledge

**ARTICLES**


• Rosler, Martha (1991), ‘Image simulations, computer manipulations, some considerations’ *Ten.8 (2) Digital dialogues*, England


PODCAST


WEBSITES