

Ben Sloat
February, 2017

Andy Warhol, From A to B and back again| Barthes Roland camera Lucid

Ever since the beginning of time, man has had an obsession with memory and recordkeeping. This fixation to catalog the world around us can be traced as far back as 40,000 years ago. Live Science published an article with this description:

“Archaeologists may have discovered Earth's oldest known cave art. Dating back to around 40,000 years ago, paintings in Indonesian caves of human hands and pig-deer may be the oldest ever found — or, at the very least, comparable in age to cave art in Europe...”

This primitive desire to preserve what we see or do is somehow embedded deep within our DNA. The want to share and express what we experience is only disrupted by the lack, or inability to fully pass on what we consider as a factual truth or message.

As humans, we attempt to record our experiences in hopes to somehow communicate better with others and perhaps leave behind a trace of what life was like during our existence. Humans have tried to do this in many ways, dating all the way back to primal cave drawings, spoken language, followed by printed language as well as art. These were all attempts to preserve what we now call a memory.

Memories are the way in which the mind stores and remembers information. We all remember things differently; most of the time we may not remember each detail as it happened, let alone the feelings that many have accompanied that memory. This is because memory can be affected by many things: life experiences, trauma, age, gender, and even education or societal status. All of these things must be taken into account when it comes to memory. In psychology,

this is sometimes referred to as memory bias; this cognitive bias phenomenon enhances or impairs the recollection of a memory. In turn, giving a false facade to that memory.

The struggle to remember or preserve the past is something that many artists have explored. Some artists have even dedicated numerous years of their lives to this subject matter. They have searched for the understanding of this rapidly depleting subject of the mind. One of the passages from the book *Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and back again)* by Andy Warhol, impacted my studies a great deal because Andy indirectly describes his struggle on this topic.

“Of the five senses, smell has the closest thing to the full power of the past. Smell really is transporting; seeing, hearing touching and tasting are just not as strong as smelling. If you want your whole being to go back to something...”

Andy goes on to say that he likes to revisit his past by smelling colognes. By doing this, Andy feels like he is in control. It allows him to go back for a limited time without experiencing any of the lingering effects of recalling unwanted memories.

Andy later describes his disappointment about photography as a way to relive a memory. This idea of his intrigues me, but also puzzles me. I relate more to the reading of *Barthes Roland, Camera Lucid*. In this reading, it states that an image can take you back in time, to a place or a specific era in one's life. Andy refutes this way of thinking by stating

“I love the way the lobby of the Paramount on Broadway used to smell. I would close my eyes and breathe deep whenever I was in it. Then they tore it down. I can look all I want at a picture of that lobby, but so what! I can never smell it again.”

In this short quote, Andy implies through his own beliefs, that an image of a place or time holds no intrinsic value.

It was this statement that caused me to think deeply about my own work, as well as how my work could hold its own power. My work does not have a smell of its own. My work is solely retinal. Due to this, Andy's description could never relate to my work in particular.

After reading the opening passage from Barthes Roland Camera Lucid, I knew that Andy's way of thinking, though intriguing, lacked a full understanding of why we attempt to capture an image.

In the opening passage Barthes writes:

"One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: "I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor.""

This passage set up the dialog that depending on one's outlook of a photograph, can take one back to a specific time and place. It was not until Barthes' exploration regarding the question, of what is a photograph, did I understand what was missing from Andy's philosophy.

Barthes explores what a photo is. He breaks it down into three main parts:

"...to do, to undergo, to look. The Operator is the Photographer. The Spectator is ourselves. All of us glance through collections of photographs. The person or thing photographed, is the target."

It is with this understanding, that we can see that there are numerous elements in a photo.

Yet, Barthes takes it one step further by explaining that every image is just an illusion and that every image we take or see is just a smokescreen of that time or place. He states:

"Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of "posing," I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image."

It is with this statement that we begin to understand that even though a photograph captures the implicit truth, the lens has a way of hiding that real truth.

Barthes goes on to describe his definition of this event as “photographic rituals.” In this ritual, the subject knows the photograph is being taken and starts his/her transformation. In this action, the subject hides it's true self. This gives the end image a falsehood. It does not show the true reality of the event. Yet, it is with this falsehood that both Andy, Barthes, and myself seem to agree upon.

No matter what the image is, all images seem to do one thing, they objectify every subject. It is within this phenomenon of transforming a subject into an object that we now begin to understand the role of the viewer. As viewers apply their gaze to an image, each image becomes an object of pleasure for the viewer. In this instance, the image is no longer an image; it is now a symbol of what was, what could have been or what they believe happened.

With the understanding that each viewer now has applied their own impression on to the image, we must also understand that each person holds their own memory bank of information. This memory bank changes the way an image is viewed or will be viewed. Barthes speaks about this spectacle by alluding that we can never capture the full truth in an image because we will never know what the person was thinking at the moment the photo was taken.

In today's world; Barthes way of thinking can be found when looking on social media. You can find thousands of images displayed for the viewer to objectify. From family photos, to the infamous and frequently taken, selfie, to images of locations that many have yet to travel and experience. In this instance, each image hides a truth that the viewer may never know. Each viewer can only infer their understanding of the subject.

In my work of abandonment, I have constituted that the viewer use their own memory bank of information filled with their own life experiences, trauma, gender status, education and even age, to help them resolve their own interpretation of my work. It is my goal for the viewer to discover their own meaning by deciding what they believe is true within my work. By this method of self-discovery, my work finds its own power; this allows the viewer to pull information from every avenue to try to fill in what they feel is missing.

Just like Andy's work in archiving everyday objects and placing them in a small brown box, my work will capture the same daily abandonment objects, but instead of placing them in a brown box, they will be archived in a photograph. In this ritual of photographing a subject, I have permanently encapsulated the photo in time for all to objectify with their own interpretation of the work.