Perception - What our eyes see

Who is looking at the photograph - you or the photographer?

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Whoever looks at a photograph sees it, as it were, through four eyes: his own and those of the photographer. The photographer lets others see what he has seen himself. Thus, to some extent, he directs our eye. The challenge for the photographer goes further however, as the work of Hiroshi Sugimoto shows.

Our eye filters out many of the details whilst the camera, the fifth eye, correctly records everything, even the details the photographer has not seen. It is therefore not so strange that for photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto, although he chooses subjects like seascapes, movie theatres, wax statues, diorama’s and electric discharges, his real field of research is perception.
What actually does the looking? And what is seeing? On most of his seascapes we only see water and sky. The eye shall look quickly for details, for something it can make a story of, or give a meaning to. The horizon only offers the restless eye a tentative hold, for it is in the nature of a horizon to remain unreachable.

There is only the fullness of the emptiness, there is no boat, no seagull, no striking coastline, no clouds or waves. In some pictures, the shot is consciously kept out of focus.

There is only what is. The eye searches and in doing so causes us not to see that what is.

**An entire film on just one photo**

Influenced by Zen Buddhism, Sugimoto pondered: What happens if I could capture an entire film on just one photo?

In his shots of movie theatres, we see the (projection) screen surrounded by the theatre. Because for the one single photo he has the camera shutter open in one long exposure during the entire performance, all that has moved during that time is no longer visible. Thus, although people came in, saw the movie and left again, we only see a white screen and the empty theatre chairs. Of the movie with its moving images only an illuminated white surface is left.

Because there is a screen we see the light that makes the projection possible and because of the light we also see the space for the spectators. We see no spectators however and no movie, only light and space.

In his dioramas we see imitations of natural scenes. In the Victorian time these were popular arrangements of stuffed animals in a décor that suggested their natural surroundings.

Also, waxen images of historical figures depict living beings but they are only exact copies of the real thing.

It is all artificial and we experience only a second-hand viewing. For we look at interpretations and thought images of how something must have been and we do not see the real life of these animals or people. The research of perception is put into focus when Sugimoto in the photo’s he takes - besides the bizarre looking real or dusty lifelessness - also seems to put aside their history of education and
entertainment. Thus, there is freedom to really look. The images and the scenes in his photos are therefore of the same quality that a painter might obtain if he were to have such animals and people alive before him.

In his series ‘Lightning Fields’ he seems to have withdrawn himself completely from the steering dominion of the eye.

In a bath with chemicals wherein a photographic plate lies, he causes an electric charge. The effects of the discharge are then photographed. On the photos, with their etheric structures, it seems that we are seeing life itself appearing. Without the intervention of the eye of the photographer it is allowed to show itself. He is only instrumental in the publication. We are being thrown back to our only perception, eye to eye with nature.

Because in the theatre-photos of the entire movie presentation and its audience only the white screen and the empty space of the theatre is captured, life’s transitory nature becomes visible as it actually is. The motion and perception of the human being takes place in time and space and this truth and our perception are now put under a question mark. While we think that our eye perceives neutrally, we only see our own ideas projected over what we see. The viewer and what he saw affirm each other in their temporary and relative existence.

But first, when we give the images and the perception an absolute status, they are seen as real and only later do we see the make-belief life and do we recognize that our eyes are blind while seeing. We are thus trapped in the unceasing exchange of the opposites: of good and evil, stress and relaxation, hate and love. And we must satisfy the desire for emotion by looking further at that ‘movie of the appearance of reality’.

There must be light

The many changing images on the movie screen and as well as our perceptions are only possible when there is light. All that is manifested is only possible because of the light. It is of course true for most people that the light of consciousness illuminates the movie track of their memory. It projects stories and images in our brain and our desires and fears deform the perception.

Therefore, when there are no spectators and no movie, there is only light and there is no movie without an observer. Public and movie, the observer and the observed, the subject and object are ultimately unreal. Only the light is
permanent and real.

In the photographs, the light of the movie projector seems to be separated from the observer and the observed and to take the place of observation itself. And the dictatorship of the conditioned clouded eye seems to be absent for a moment.

The eye sees by means of the light but we do not see the light itself because the seeing and the light are in reality one.

The sight and the clarity of the light that does not cast a shadow makes use of the eye when necessary in order to show ‘that what is’. It is the liberated light of the consciousness in the soul that knows all and gives life to all things. No knowing and no known one, just a Knowing in itself. A free emergence of everything.

That is possibly what Sugimoto caught a glimpse of during his childhood and later as an adult though his Zen-orientation and his out-of-body experiences and what inspired his research on perception.

When you think to know something, you have brought it back to a concept.

Attribution of words and concepts like sea and air are of course practical in relative existence, but yet there still appears a horizon that separates. Beyond and outside of this relativity there is no longer a photograph to show our vision, only light, only ‘that which is’.