

What the Eye Does not See¹ / 31 Indicative Objects

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Duo exhibition with
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She can see the stars out there. There are millions of them, and she captures them. For she is able to capture a different wavelength of light than the human retina is able to make out. Man is only able to see a fraction of the stars she can see. Oh, inadequate humans. Can you believe she is able to make accessible to them things that they otherwise would not be able to perceive? And yet, had it not been for them she would not have existed. She is the result of their enterprise, of their need to register, measure, prove; of their need to capture. She is photography. She did not exist prior to human kind², as the stars did.

She is fast. Lightning fast. Her efficiency surpasses humans by some distance. Even in her analogue form. She can capture light on film in the blink of an eye, and transfer it to paper almost as fast. Humans will need hours to produce an image as detailed as she can. Is it even possible to depict by hand the same that a camera captures with the help of light? The pencil, with its silver-grey graphite, pure carbon, pure element; it can imitate the black and white photography. But if you look at it closely, you will be able to see that what you thought were seamless gradations and transitions in silver gelatine, in reality, have traces of pencil lines and laborious movements from erasers and fingers.

She has not yet made up her mind about whether humans are naive or if they suffer from megalomania – maybe a bit of both – because it seems as if they still have the illusion that with her help, they will be able to capture reality as it is. And this in spite of the fact that numerous thinkers have argued that such a thing is impossible; with or without a camera. What humans perceive can only tell us something about the character of the apparatus of perception, they posit, and nothing about the actual state of the world. She thinks of a German philosopher³, and his idea about das Ding an sich; ‘things in themselves’ – independent of observation and perception – are not accessible to man other than as appearances filtered through their senses and notions. She thinks of a French philosopher⁴, who meant that in the interaction between different representations, there really was no origin, no beginning, no such thing as a source. Then, she remembered a story she once had heard, about scientists who studied a certain type of microorganism. It appeared that these tiny creatures, subjects of observations in a laboratory, changed their behaviour while being under the magnifying glass. They moved faster, the cell division happened more rapidly. Do the stars too change their behaviour when she directs her lens towards them? She knew, at least, that many of them no longer existed, however pronounced they appeared in her pictures. Perhaps they had extinguished millions of years ago. Light is fast, but not fast enough.

She thinks about how certain artists as early as the start of the 1900s abandoned the idea that she, photography, should depict reality the way the eye saw it. Perhaps they had realised that this was not possible. Perhaps they considered it uninteresting. In any case, already back then they started to manipulate the image in various ways. With inspiration from movements such as Dadaism, surrealism,

cubism and futurism, the subjective, the relative and the subconscious was brought to the fore; the wish to capture reality “as it is”⁵, whatever that means, apparently did not cross their minds.

In spite of this history, though, and even now, when she so easily can let herself be manipulated digitally, it seemed like the human race took her testimony as a kind of proof. However, if the testimony does not correspond with “reality”, a sense of unease can set in. As in one case, during a time when the world had been hit by a virus pandemic, and people were told to stay inside as much as possible. A still from a video, printed in one of the country’s largest papers, showed a busy street where people seemingly did not care about contamination control at all⁶. The camera had zoomed in, and the perspective made it hard to apprehend the actual distance between people⁷. There were accusations of spreading fear and falsehoods⁸. What was the most frightening part about it, she wondered. The potential danger of contamination? That a well-known street looked different from how people remembered it? That not even she, photography, was able to capture the complex, unstable and intangible reality?⁹

In post-truth times¹⁰, people will believe what they want to believe anyway. They will always find “proof” for the truth they choose to adhere to. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why she feels it is her rightful place to add distortions; as if to remind them of her own presence, and her own limitations. She imposes herself: “Here I am! With the reflections from the flash, with the refractions in the lens, with wrong focus and the over- and under exposure that occasionally occurs.” The thing that by someone was intended to capture an image, to give an exact representation of an object, becomes diffuse. It can even disappear entirely. What is left, is her presence and that of the light.

For she is the light. Or rather, she captures light. The sun that shines through the trees; the backlight which one averts one’s eyes from. She has heard that humans can become blind by looking directly into the sun for too long. She got to think of an eccentric French thinker and author, whose name suddenly escaped her. He viewed the life giving sun as something brutal and destructive because of its unbridled energy¹¹. Man would prefer her not to turn towards the light either. Be it the sun or other sources of light that they themselves have created. It can lead to unwanted effects. Her presence becomes more apparent; a powerful backlight can wipe out the surroundings. What is left is a play of colours in the optics of the camera. A play of colours which the eye does not see.

Torill Østby Haaland
Curator of the exhibition

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¹ The title refers to Osip Brik’s (1888-1945) article: “What the Eye does not see”. (I: The Photography Reader, edited by Liz Wells, Routledge, 2003.) Relevant quotes: “The task of the cinema and the camera is not to imitate the human eye, but to see and record what the human eye does not see.” (s. 90), “The camera can function independently; can see in ways that man is not accustomed to – can suggest new points of view and demonstrate how to look at things differently.” (s. 90) og “The cinema and the photo-eye must create their own point of view, and use it. They must expand – not imitate – the ordinary optical radius of the human eye.” (p. 91).

² “...photography is clearly much more than a particular technology of image-making. It is also a social and cultural practice embedded in history and human agency.” (Kemper, Sarah: “THE SHADOW OF THE OBJECT.” Photography and realism.” I: The Photography Reader, edited by Liz Wells, Routledge, 2003, p. 206.)

³ Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

⁴ Jacques Derrida (1930-2004).

⁵ Clarke, Graham: «The Photograph manipulated», I: The Photograph, Oxford University Press, 1997.

⁶ <https://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/stappfullt-i-oslo---folk-gir-faen/72334799> [retrieved: 24.2.2020]

⁷ The Norwegian newspaper Dagbladet answers to the criticism: "Zooming in on images is a common practice in journalism. It is correct that zooming with a camera gives less sharpness of depth, and that this can pull people together for the on-looking eye. But this cannot increase, or decrease, the number of people in the photo, or in the video.» Alexandra Beverjord, <https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/ubehaget-og-journalistikken/72336654> [retrieved: 24.4.2020]

⁸ See e.g.: <https://resett.no/2020/04/05/massiv-kritikk-mot-dagbladet-etter-coronarapport-fra-oslo-beskyldes-for-bildemanipulering/> [retrieved: 24.4.2020]

⁹ See Kember, Sarah: «'THE SHADOW OF THE OBJECT.' Photography and realism." (I: The Photography Reader, edited by Liz Wells, Routledge, 2003) for a feminist analysis of the ideal of realism in photography.

¹⁰ In the book *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* (2004), the American writer Ralph Keyes shows how deceit and falsehoods have become more widespread in the media run world of today. Lies and dishonesty has gone from something to defeat, to becoming accepted in many circumstances, he claims. In 2016 (the year of the Brexit referendum and the Trump election), the word 'Post-truth' was chosen «the word of the year» by Oxford Dictionary.

¹¹ Bataille, George: *L'anus solaire*, 1927.