The Intermittent Image

Errors can occur in all photographic practice but the technology and culture of digital photography reduce opportunities for mistakes and the likelihood of any being retained or published. This has led to the removal of error from the prevailing image culture with the consequent foregrounding of accuracy and resemblance in relation to everyday photography practice. Error images disrupt the conventions of photographic representation and in so doing present an alternate conception of photography as emergent, processual and performative. The error image exposes photography as a human and technological 'act' and presents the viewer with a transformative visual experience which has aesthetic interest and value.

digital; error; photographic culture; aesthetics; performative.

Introduction

The discussion presented here emerges from a practice research project entitled *In Pursuit of Error* ([1]). The project seeks submissions of photographs from artists, photographers and the general public which have gone 'wrong' in some way. The photographs sought are those which have, either through some technological fault or human error, not come out correctly, by which I mean that the resulting image does not represent what was in front of the camera according to the expectations of the photographer. This includes a wide range of common photographic 'errors' such as motion blur, light leaks, de-focussing, over or under exposure, inadvertent cropping, or combinations of these things.

The responses to *In Pursuit of Error* suggest that there is an awareness amongst image-makers of the potential aesthetic value of their mistakes. This is supported by the accompanying commentary submitted by participants which echoes and reinforces my interest in these images. This paper will argue that advancements in digital photography and the image-culture of the internet combine to make the error a unique and increasingly rare phenomenon in photographic culture. It will present some of the reasons why I think the error has the potential to interfere with our expectations and assumptions about photography and why I believe this is valuable.

Errors in photographic practice and culture

Analogue photography has always contained the potential for error. Film cameras offer many possible pitfalls through the cycle of loading, shooting, developing and printing. In all of these phases the sensitivity of the materials provides chances for serendipity to enter the process of making photographs. Any amateur photographer has in their archive photographs which have not come out right but which are still

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[1] http://inpursuitoferror.co.uk

retained, incorporated as part of the collection alongside other more successful images. Artist photographers were quick to spot the potential of the error in analogue photography and to curate its deliberate appearance in their work. Ralph Eugene Meatyard's 'No Focus' experiments and the doctrine of '*are-bure-boke*' (grainy, blurry, out-of-focus) espoused by the photographers associated with *Provoke* in Japan (Chong 2012) are examples of ways in which the error was used to challenge the conventions of representational photography.

The advent of digital photography and the internet created a new set of parameters for the taking and viewing of photographs. The relative simplicity of digital cameras meant that the potential for error in the pre and production stages of image making was considerably lessened. Most cameras came with an 'auto' function in which ISO, shutter speed, aperture and focus was dealt with by the camera with minimal intervention by the photographer. While advanced film cameras also came with these functions, in the digital context these facilities, allied with the digital capture and storage of the image, greatly increased the likelihood of reliable, accurate images time after time. Digital cameras were, and are, marketed for their ability to render the scene in front of the photographer in the truest and most comprehensive detail possible. The language of automation and increasing image resolution has come to equate digital photography with the capture of reliable resemblances of the world.

In this respect I would argue that digital photography has returned us to a point where the truth claims for photography could be at their highest. Truth is used here in the sense of objective representation; the capacity for a seamless route from reality through the lens to the screen without any apparent interference by an interlocutor or interpreter: an image of the world as-it-is. The impartiality of the digital photograph is magnified by its distribution via the internet through which the anonymity and apparent neutrality of the vast quantity of photographs comes to represent the world.

In this context, what of the error? Photographic errors still occur, but as digital data are barely able to surface to the screen before they are erased. While we may inadvertently harbour error-images in own digital archives or the cloud, it is unlikely that unless we have a particular interest in an image that we will retain it or make it publically available, thus making the digital error less likely to be encountered either on the internet or in our own collections.

Consequently, a distinction emerges between the analogue and digital error. Analogue errors, accidental or deliberate, are more likely and more present in our photographic image consciousness. This is not the case for the digital error which is profoundly discontinuous with the normal appearance of digital photography and finds itself annulled through the conventions of digital production and internet publication. In both analogue and digital photography the error is an aberration, it occurs despite our intentions and sometimes because of it, but in both cases it represents a collapse of the expected photographic agenda. However, the digital

error is more vulnerable and ephemeral. It is intermittent; a broken, fragmentary presence, if indeed it is a presence at all.

In light of the almost universal use of digital cameras, I would argue that the apparent invisibility of the error is problematic for an understanding of photography as a creative activity. The lack of errors in the image world of digital photography implies a uniformity of practice, and reinforces an understanding of photography as a representational corollary between subject and image.

Some discussions of the aesthetic value of photographs circle the question of representation and find in the indexicality of the photograph the totality of the medium's meaning, arguing that it is only what is represented that can have any intrinsic value or aesthetic interest (Scruton 1983). As a photographer I find arguments which devolve the function of the photograph to that of mere copy to be simplistic. However, with a lack of variance in photographic outputs the underlying issue at stake in Scruton's analysis – that a photograph should have a relationship of resemblance to its subject in order to be considered 'photography' - is a generally held truth for most ordinary users and consumers of digital photography (Sutton 2007 p.169). This is problematic for the digital error which, by its nature, does not form recognisable resemblances and could lead to it not being seen as photography at all. In order to address the aesthetic value of the error it will be necessary to explore aspects of photography other than those associated with representation.

The act of photographing

A potential value of the error is its ability to disrupt the homogeneity of the digital image-world. The error poses another way of viewing a photograph not simply as a product, but as a process. Arguments about photographs as representations overlook the numerous, time-based processes which bring the photographic image into being. To see the relationship between the thing photographed and the resulting image in a strictly causal relation, as a form of transmittal, is to overlook the act of photographing as an activity taking place in context. Phillips refers to this as a photographic *event,* a time based action through which an image is recorded (Philips 2009 p.337).

The photographic event is performative and involves two aspects: the human act and the camera act. Attention to the human act of photographing places us back into the time of making and recoups the significance of that event to the resulting image. This is relevant to the error as it foregrounds the multiple aspects of light, location and photographer's actions that combine to form the singular occurrence of the photograph. The aleatory potential of the act is manifested through the indeterminacy of the resulting error-image. These processual and performative features hold for all photography because in all situations the creation of a photograph is a time-based act. However, we are not drawn to comment upon the act in any meaningful way when we consider photography solely through engagement with its end products. The ontological complexity of the performative process makes

it liable to neglect, particularly because the "dramatic intensity" of the photographic image obscures the experiential process which brings it into being (Shusterman 2012 p.72). If the images we are regularly presented with do not demonstrate any human actor at work in their creation, we are less inclined to think about the act at all. In fact, the history of consumer photography is based on simplifying and all but eradicating the potentially disruptive actions of the photographer in order to produce an acceptable outcome.

The ontology of the photograph is uniquely tied up with the technology of production and it is the camera's performance which also governs the outcome of the resulting image. It is easy to lose sight of the significance of the technology in the creation of the photograph, particularly in the digital realm in which observable mechanical operations have been supplanted by the 'black box' which mysteriously converts the substance of the real world into an algorithmic image (Lister 2013 p.13).

The camera 'sees' and the photographer sees but neither see in precisely the same way. When there is a breakdown of ability in the photographer (for example leaving a shutter speed too slow, or aperture too wide for the scene being photographed), the camera will 'see' according to those settings, resulting in an error-image. The photographer's absence from the act of photographing has still produced an image however it is the camera that has performed the act of image-making and it is the intervention of the technology in the creation of the error which I believe creates its unique appeal. For what we are presented with is not a product of human seeing or intention but a vision of computational or technological seeing, a vision which is non-human but which nonetheless can still be recognised as 'photography'.

Technology becomes a key factor in the creative process: the error happens precisely *because* of the technological process of the camera and to some extent this knowledge can be used to make 'accidents' happen at will. In this interpretation the camera is not simply a dumb instrument; it offers the potential of its own seeing, and in doing so reminds us of the contingency and complexity of the photographic process.

Agency, automatism and the error

Foregrounding the camera in the creation of the error-image may appear to diminish the role of the photographer and in so doing provide a case against the aesthetic value of errors. This is not the agenda being pursued here but it is important to discuss the difference between errors which occur by accident and those which are pursued deliberately in case there is an aesthetic distinction to be drawn between them.

"...photographers do not play with their plaything but against it. They creep into the camera in order to bring to light the tricks concealed within." (Flusser 2000 p.27). Photographers have always been engaged in the active disruption of the image through forcing the camera to perform in ways outside of its conventional programme. In the error-image the photographer's agency and the camera's automatism find an alliance in which it is difficult to discern the products of each

performer. The photographer may know that leaving the shutter open for a few seconds longer, or moving the camera while shooting will create an error-image however she cannot predict with any certainty what the final image will look like.

The performance of the error can only be scripted up to a certain point, in terms of the manipulation of the controls and what the camera is pointed at and how. The error cannot be 'created' in the same sense that a conventional photograph is created, by observing and directing the subject in the frame, or by applying the particular authorial or stylistic methods of the individual photographer (Armstrong 2012). The deliberate error, created through manipulation of the camera, lacks authorial control in the same way that the accidental error does, precisely because it is not possible to stamp the authority of the photographer's vision on the error-image. The appearance of the error will be a surprise, whether occurring accidentally or deliberately, the only difference will be the photographer's knowledge or lack of knowledge of the performative actions which brought the error into being.

If there is no discernible difference between the accidental or purposeful error-image, then the circumstances of how that error came into being need have little bearing on our aesthetic interest in it. The error is emergent, it occurs at the moment of its making and is neither predicated on nor reducible to the criteria that brought it into being (Sawyer 2000 p.152). This irreproducibility is what makes the error so evocative: it contains within it the potential for a radical unknowing.

The error-image

The error gains aesthetic value by presenting an alternative conception of photography as performance. However, it is necessarily the case that this performance results in a photographic object. The photograph cannot make visible the complexity of the event nor make evident the precise activity of photographer and camera in the creation of the image. In order to ascribe aesthetic value to the error *qua* image it will be necessary to think about what it signifies, over and above what it might depict.

Like all photographs the error-image is indexical, however what is unclear is what the error-image indexes; what it might be that is presented by the image. How do we read the photograph when the architecture of the error is foregrounded and overlays the scene or object which would have been depicted but which is now subsumed? In the case of the error-image we are not looking at the photograph to answer a question of *what* is depicted, but rather *why* this depiction has occurred.

De Duve (1978) draws a distinction between the instaneity of the snapshot and the expansion of the time-exposure as a way to distinguish the diverse content of the photographic image. At first glance the error-image would appear to offer itself as a snapshot: the image is a product of what appears to be rapid or careless action in which the technical fault of human or camera registers a singular event. However, what is being described here is the *event* of photographing, the process rather than

the product. The error-image cannot be grasped instantaneously, as can the snapshot, it does not arrest time as the snapshot must, instead it elongates and distorts time, it pulls away from representation, from the 'slice of life' that is characterised by the snapshot.

The error-image is a peculiarity. Unlike conventional photographs its appearance is anomalous; it leaps out at us, obvious by its difference, perhaps creating a moment's pause as we look through our downloaded files and wonder – what happened there? Because of the complex performative circumstances of its creation, whether deliberate or accidental, the error image cannot be conclusively ascribed to an event in the past; the photographer cannot return to the precise circumstances of its making with any certainty. What we are faced with is the presence of the image in front of us, now.

De Duve conceives of the time-exposure as a potential and protracted form of temporality which contrasts with the explicit 'here' of the snapshot. In its ambiguity the error image evades such specificity, instead presenting itself as an 'uncertain now'. Like the time exposure, the error-image is "a pause in time, charged with a potential actualization, which will eventually be carried out by speech (or memory as interior speech) and is most probably rooted in the time-consuming act of looking" (De Duve 1978 p.121).

The error-image asks us to engage in looking, and interpreting. Its contents are not immediately assimilable; we have to pore over the image contents and rebuild the circumstances of its creation in our mind. The actualization of the error image occurs in those moments of wondering, of its extension into the memory and imagination of the viewer. In so doing the error-image becomes less of a full stop and more of an ellipsis or a question mark, an opening into an alternate image world which invites the viewer to enter and construct a response.

The value of the error

The error exposes the processual nature of the photographic act and engages us in its reimagining as we view the resulting image. It is possible to find aesthetic interest in photographs that are not representations if we attend to the specific qualities of the medium and in the case of the error-image it is how and what it makes evident about photography which, I would argue, is where its aesthetic value is to be found.

McIver Lopes (2003) argues for the aesthetic potential of 'seeing through' the photograph which acknowledges how photography supplements our visual experience of the world. The error image enables us to see through to the spontaneous interplay of action, context, and technology that are engendered in the process of photographing. 'Chance' cannot be depicted but the viewer is able to attest to its presence in the photographic process because the error-image captures the random, ungoverned moment which most 'correct' photographs do not show. The error-image bridges optical dimensions and shows how the camera "intrudes upon or disturbs

what it photographs" (McIver Lopes p.443) and presents ways of seeing which are defamiliarizing as a result.

The pursuit of the analogue error discussed at the start of this paper was a realisation of the rich set of variables that attend the act of photographing and a desire to make these complexities visible. The pursuit of the digital error is an attempt to recoup this potential for transformative visual experience against the vast sway of conventional photographs which form the prominent visual agenda. Simply put, the digital error shows us something about photography that we now rarely get to see.

I have argued that the digital photographic error – the intermittent image – presents a way of viewing photography as a complex process which involves multiple contingent elements. I have discussed a number of aspects of the error, attending to its production in the performative act of photographing and exploring the correlation between deliberate and accidental errors. I have conceived the resulting error-image as a visual question which engages the viewer's imagination and makes visible the fluidity of the relationship between situation, camera and photographer in which none is prioritised in the photographic event but to which all are necessary.

The error-image exposes the complexity of photography, despite its sublimation from contemporary photographic culture which presents digital photography as immediate and unmediated. The error counters claims which would simplify and reduce photography to the creation of mere copies of the world, much less acquiesce to this being photography's sole purpose or aesthetic interest.

The intermittent presence of the digital error exposes the gap between our desire to simplify and order the world through images and the reality of the contingency of things. In doing so it reminds us of all that we don't know, and might yet discover.

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