

Visual Seminar – On Opaqueness

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Please imagine the following situation. A group of six people (well-experienced culture animators and educators and a theoretician in the field of visual culture, with experience of art practice) receive a simple, compact, digital camera and the possibility to connect it to an equally simple, black and white office printer. Along with these tools the group receive a task of coming up with a happening/action/series of photos/installation (there is no specification as for the form) which will exceed the obvious, instinctive use of a still camera as “the right”, “effective”, “cool” and “proven” tool of education. The task is a kind of conceptual challenge constituting an attempt to pose a question in action – of meaning on one hand and of the properties and the consequences of using photography, on the other. A troubling question indeed, since its asked via no other means than photography itself.

The above mentioned group had three hours to complete their assignment. The final part of the practice was presenting its effects to the other participants of the meeting. When the time had passed, the group stood in front of us empty-handed - no photos, no presentation, no device, no exhibition hanging on strings. They spoke one after another, and what they said added up to the following statement: „After we had learnt what our task consisted in, we started from telling one another about our personal experiences concerning photography used in situations unrelated to our professional work. We talked both about taking images and about being photographed. It turned out very quickly that all our stories concerned unpleasant incidents – situations when we could not take a good-quality photo, when somebody was photographing us despite our will, when the equipment failed us and later on we wondered with apprehension who might see our work. We talked about these things for nearly three hours and it was an important experience to all of us – still we cannot share it with you, since we wish to keep it to ourselves. All this time, we did not even touch the camera, which lied on the table, so we have nothing to show you. Our happening is a conscious act of refraining from taking photos as part of our action – which does not change the fact that everything we did concerned photography”.

There was silence among the listeners. Some of them looked around and exchanged puzzled looks. Finally, somebody uttered: „How come...?” Exactly, - how come? Why did it come as a surprise? What was the reason for the consternation, disappointment or misunderstanding? Is a happening based on NOT taking photographs still a photographic performance? Can an activity that involves photography be of use to something else than learning how to take images? What is actually the tool we use so readily in our animation, educational, professional work, as well as in our everyday private affairs, and how is it changing? How is the situation of taking (and not-taking) photos affecting our relation with reality and with other people? Where does this internal imperative come from, the imperative of reaching for a camera and hence of taking and watching photos? What is the presence of photography changing in our behaviour, our way of looking, and finally – our worldview?

The situation I have described above happened (or, to be exact, was remembered by me) during a Visual Seminar, a meeting being a part of Polska.doc project implemented by Assotiation of Creatives

Initiatives “e”. During the Seminar fifteen practitioners (animators, educators, coordinators, inventors of projects involving such means and media as film, photography, art, design, the Internet and public space) met with theoreticians (visual culture anthropologists, sociologists, new media researchers, curators and artists) to work side by side considering their previous experiences and the future of what I would tentatively call visual education.

Where did the idea come from? In **Assotiation “e”** we have been involved in projects featuring such media as film and photography for ten years. Additionally we have been running programmes which support local leaders – young or senior ones – in implementing their own ideas. Both in our own actions and in those carried out by our participants we see continuous or even growing popularity and commonness of using the tools designed to watch, create or show broadly defined images – projects consisting in „re-photographing” old photos, intergenerational exhibitions of family portraits, film clubs organised in local institutions or in the open air, photo reporting workshops connected with running a blog or a local newspaper, learning how to use a camera and creating one’s own first film, exhibitions of images in public space, acquiring new abilities related to graphic design and digital processing of photos.

These are just a few of the working methods, often reduplicated as „good practices”. In none of the above the visual tools were used „for their own sake”, they were a kind of an excuse, a method, indeed a tool making it possible to create a certain socio-cultural situation: to make neighbors meet one another, to talk about difficult past, to encourage the older and the younger generation to get to know each other, to learn how to make one’s own ideas turn into reality. The tools seem to have a big potential and a certain reproducible effectiveness – the higher the cheaper and the more available they become.

Technological change is not the only one we can observe – such statements as „everybody can make movies these days” or „everybody is a photographer, because everybody is equipped with a camera in their mobile phone” entail questions which expose nuances in the changes that take place before our very eyes, changes that refer not only to the tools alone, but to the way of using them and the ensuing processes: transformation of our identity, the nature of human relations, our being and acting in the world. As the tools are evolving, their place and their practical use are changing as well – what is however lagging behind is our understanding of the shift in the meaning, the purpose and the manners of incorporating images (created or watched) into educational and animation projects. Many inventors and coordinators of such projects reach for photography as a simple, obvious and attractive tool, a decision which for the purpose of application grants is often justified with the all too familiar and in fact rather vague argument that „in the modern world dominated by images, learning photography is important”. Whereas thinking about photography may need moving one step further: why is it actually “important” and what does it mean? How can it be used and where is it not usable any longer? What opportunities does it bring and what limitations? How do we measure its „effectiveness” and whether this criterion is of relevance here? What is it actually, and why and how do we involve it in our work?

The task which could be posed in relation to the above would be similar to the one I described at the beginning – recognising visual tools as an excuse for socio-cultural situations (and an effective working method as well) would make them visible. It means: acknowledging their problematic status, volatility and their implications, not only in the scope of particular projects but broadly - in the field of human relations and reality. Considering media, new technologies or a simple still camera without taking them for granted (in other words, asking oneself a naive question – „why am I using it?”) may lead to an (only seemingly naive) answer – these are the tools used for various practices of looking: watching, showing, observing. Using them we are building relations or situations based on look – an elementary activity (and hence almost invisible), whose „naturalness” and „obviousness” offers a wide spectrum of possible doings: an activity which intangibly, due to its ubiquity, arranges our reality.

Look makes learning, cognition, communication and action possible. It is a selective process –

we skim certain things off the surroundings while neglecting the other, we discriminate nice from ugly, plain from extraordinary, we offer some things only a superficial glance while feasting eyes on some other. Naturally, we are speaking here about individual experiences. What they have in common is the fact that for most people the fundamental activity of thinking is visual and related to looking (try really hard not to think about a pink elephant – what do you see?). Maybe it is because of the brain structure (I do not know that), but what I consider to be a more significant and certain conclusion is this – for seeing people looking is the primary way of functioning in the world, therefore it determines what the world looks like and our *modus operandi*.

This discussion may seem abstract until we draw a certain conclusion from it and pose a relevant assignment. Assuming that looking is the activity that to a large extent affects how we function in the world, how we think and what we do, maybe it is worthwhile to devote a moment to some form of „exercise in looking”? During early years education we learn to read – it goes without saying that the skill is necessary to progress in all different fields and nowadays, in Poland there are very few illiterate people, and even less opponents of literacy courses. No one asks however (or very few persons do that) how and why we could learn to look. Obviously: to look not in the meaning of to move eyeballs, but to look in the meaning of to participate: consciously, attentively, and finally – critically. Look that would translate into exercise in noticing things that at first glance go unnoticed – starting from obliterated traces of the past of our own town, through the decisions made by authorities regarding the aesthetics of so called representative sites, through transparency of some social groups at the cost of „over-visibility” of some other, up to the ability to see a film, advertising, city landscape, an Internet website or a museum exhibition as some kind of construction. The point is not to sharpen our „manipulation” alertness – it is enough if we are able to note that we have to do with the effects of someone’s specific decisions, with something designed and intended to be watched, structures consistent with someone’s idea which imply a certain recipient, certain reactions – expected though not inevitable.

Why is it that particularly images seem to be the best for this kind of visual education, with its built-in aspects of critical education? It is not only because images “dominate” and „flood”; not only because looking is our crucial practice related to thinking, not even because they are available and popular. Another reason is that pictures, particularly more realistic ones – such as film and photography – resemble the world to such an extent that they trick us into thinking, unconsciously, instinctively, or maybe despite ourselves (e.g. like when we are watching a horror movie in the cinema and we are trying very hard not to be afraid), that looking at them we are looking through a window. In other words: assuming that they offer us insight and access to certain „true reality”, visible “as a fact of nature”. Such images easily encourage emotional engagement, spur feelings, provide for “evidence” or a lesson from the past („that is how it was”) – they often give much pleasure (which is good), but sometimes they are mistaken for reality (which is much worse). They are no longer photos, films, pictures, pieces of art; thinking about them as visions of artists is suspended. Calling them “objective” or “true” is very tempting.

This – a bit paradoxically – makes teaching how to look critically (i.e. thoughtfully, consciously, allowing for doubts and questions) a good exercise in critical thinking, and consequently, in more aware being in the world, which would result from our own decisions and choices. In this sense visual education – as a certain project to be developed in the future – should not be a separate and „elevated” branch of education, but rather a form of it, possible to use at the intersection of various disciplines, where it could function as an excellent tool for initiating discussions, for encouraging practice of participation, for posing questions and going beyond trite clichés.

And why „visual”? It is easy to see that another discipline has already marked its presence – media education, which is also in the process of coining definitions and priorities. Most certainly they are not opposing constructs – both perspectives are very likely complementary, and therefore they seem slightly different. „Mediality” of media education is often (though not always) reduced to mass

media – such as television, press, the Internet – which tend to be perceived as a sort of „a threat”, both due to the content of e.g. news, or their form promoting solitary participation. Therefore objectives of media education are on one hand certain prophylactics and promoting conscious reception and on the other – „digital literacy” in the meaning of paying attention to the use and perception of new technologies. These are necessary skills and fortunately „demonic nature” of media is not what motivates most of media educators for their work.

What would make visual education distinguishable is the fact that it is situated one step earlier – the skills it is intended to develop are not determined by media advancement (you can practise critical looking while walking in the street), though they can make media use more beneficial; „media” in the meaning of visual education do not stand for mass media or new technologies only (Internet, mobile phone cameras, digital cameras, etc.) but also the tools and situations allowing for watching and showing or for conscious decision to refrain from doing so. And it is not about turning our back on them, but on the contrary – about particular focus, paying attention and making effort to remember that reality is a bit like photography – what it will look like depends on how we will make it.

Translated by Karolina Giedrys-Majkut