

Peripheral Vision

By Amy Ritchie Johnson

Photography has won a long war to be considered a valid art form. The potential for photography as art is vast. Photography as a technology has remade the world; it is that powerful a medium. Any socio-cultural or aesthetic ruts are ours, not those of photography. In fact, photographic practices are metamorphic tools to transcend ruts, to sort out our present and our history, and to see our selves more clearly. Evermore media-driven and image-saturated, it is imperative that we become more responsible and conscious in our acts of making and disseminating imagery, and of the images themselves.

There is a trend in contemporary [straight] photography growing in the long shadow of the traditional “view of reality as an exotic prize to be tracked down and captured by the diligent hunter-with-a-camera”¹, a subtler approach to be postulated in this essay, as well as exemplified in the exhibition, *Peripheral Vision*. This trend could also be considered a way for photography —photography that calls itself art most especially—to transcend the longstanding exploitation aesthetic, the reigning conceptualist modes of conceiving art, and to transcend the entrenched notions of image- and art-making that succumb to the idea of art or life as spectacle to be consumed. This fresh use of the photograph goes beyond seeing to perceiving, goes beyond concept to perception. The definition of perception in this case would be the last listed in the dictionary: “intuitive understanding and insight.”

Perceptual photography discards the 20th century “weapon of aggression” from photography practice, offering the camera instead as a mode of contemplation and self-awareness. And through these means ultimately offering a different kind of wisdom or knowing or “intelligence” about the human experience. Perhaps this trend could take us to a photographic art that suspends the grasping, consumerist thought-perspective we have been endowed with, giving us a sense of the liberation that is possible when we let go of the paradigms and power structures inherent in the way we perceive ourselves, and our interactions with the world around us.

Alan Watts, in *The Way of Zen*, explains two different, mutually important, ways of using our minds and therefore our creativity, which helps to explain the potential of perception in photography:

“For we have two types of vision—central and peripheral, not unlike the spotlight and the floodlight. Central vision is used for accurate work like reading, in which our eyes are focused on one small area after another like spotlights. Peripheral vision is less conscious, less bright than the intense ray of the spotlight. We use it for seeing at night, and for taking “subconscious” notice of objects and movements not in the direct line of central vision. Unlike the spotlight, it can take in very many things at a time.”²

Perceptual photography allows for this, this taking in of many things at a time. It filters the external world through the photographer-camera union, resulting in a visual experience that discounts dualism by being about solitude as much as relationship, about history as much as

¹Sontag, 54. “Weapon of aggression” is also Sontag’s term, 39.

²Watts actually refers to Taoist philosophy here, which is a precursor to Zen. *The Way of Zen*, Kindle Edition, location 317-330.

this moment, about geography as much as no place at all. And about inner space as well as outer. It answers the question “Once you are seeing what’s in front of you, once you are doing the continuous spiritual work of visual presence, then how do you share it?”

Circulation: Date, Place, Events by Japanese photographer Takuma Nakahira offers an historical example of the possibilities of straight photography and particularly the idea of a perceptual photography. A selection of this body of work was exhibited in Nakahira’s first ever solo exhibition in the United States, over the summer of 2013 at Yossi Milo Gallery, New York. From their press release:

“*Circulation: Date, Place, Events* was first exhibited in 1971 as part of the Seventh Paris Biennale. Each day, for seven consecutive days Nakahira photographed, developed and exhibited approximately one hundred photographs. The photographs are random glimpses from Nakahira’s daily activities in Paris, including strangers’ faces, produce stands, subway platforms, street posters and even his breakfast setting. Developing the photographs each night, Nakahira exhibited them without omission the following day. Once the walls of the exhibition space were crowded with photographs, the artist spread them onto the floor.”³

The *Circulation* project offers a fascinating study in terms of photography practice, image-dissemination, and image emphasis. The process of living and being present as an individual in a collective world is the focus. Each photograph matters only to the degree that it exists in relation to each other, and to the larger work of perceiving the material world as a mutable, perceptual space. It requires inner presence and outer presence at once—spirituality and materiality fused, bridged, made whole. In his 2003 lecture “Reconsidering the Spiritual in Art” at Virginia Commonwealth University, Donald Kuspit discussed our present-day “relentless materialization and modification of art, which are accessories to its commodification, . . . has stripped it of the sense of subjective presence . . . leaving us with the shell of art rather than its spiritual experience.”⁴ Spirituality here is not meant as a religious affiliation but as reference to “an experience of inner life” or “the deepest interiority.”

In *Peripheral Vision*, I have attempted to consider all these aspects while creating a holistic exhibition experience, exploring the use of space and presentation as integral to the experience of the work itself. This, as well as reintroducing spirituality as a vital facet to the contemporary art conversation. I have chosen three artists, William W Douglas III, Justin James Reed, and Burt Ritchie; each approaching their creative practice very differently, but presented together their artwork expertly exemplifies a perceptual photography as they engage a more contemplative approach to image-making and image-dissemination.

Douglas has a penchant for distilling the largeness of historical, geographic, and universal narratives into one image or pair of images, that suspends judgement or ownership. Like a young Hemingway, the images are his short stories. Hemingway was the master of using as few words as possible to express the inexpressible, even if through a particular lens of post-war American male grandeur that has become outmoded. Douglas too deals with a present

³Yossi Milo Gallery, http://www.yossimilo.com/exhibitions/2013_05-takuma_nakahira/

⁴Kuspit used Kandinsky’s consummate 1912 art text, *On the Spiritual in Art*, to frame his argument from essentially Kandinsky’s point of view. *Blackbird 2, 1 (2003): 7*. http://www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v2n1/gallery/kuspit_d/reconsidering_text.htm

incarnation of the American Southern coastal masculine-relational narrative, at a time of distinct socio-spiritual transformation, and clearly practices a use of photography that honors himself and his surroundings beyond the economic or social or even educational power structures that dominate our traditional use of the image.

Reed's photographs explore inner states of human being through outer forms, offering interchangeable visual associations that encourage the viewer to construct a personal and/or mythic narrative out of those associations, resulting in a reality we each create ourselves. The ungrounded images allow for, like Watts said, "taking 'subconscious' notice of objects and movements not in the direct line of central vision." Reed is also an innovator of the presentation and dissemination of images via his special edition and artist book projects and other technological-photographic overlays. Much of his work involves a self-proclaimed exploration of mysticism, concerned with the possibility of knowledge inaccessible to the central vision intellect. The four images in *Peripheral Vision* exact an archetypal, or outer-worldly, emanation of a "collective unconscious," presenting nonspecific open visual space as place for self-inquiry and reflection, as opposed to judgement, hierarchy, and consumption.

Ritchie offers a nuanced, noninvasive moving through the world in his *Walks*, that incorporates the rhythm of walking and perceiving in a visual form. In Eastern meditation, there is instruction to be present with whatever thoughts or emotions arise, suspending judgement of, or reaction to, these influences of mind, and letting them go. The point is to foster a self-awareness in the present moment that frees us from every social, political, or individual construct that causes us, and therefore those around us, suffering. Ritchie's walk sequences suggest this process, this accepting what is seen or experienced, touching it lightly (in this case with a camera) and then letting it go. Two facts about Ritchie's photography history beg mentioning as influence on his approach to his photographic work. First, he was present as an undergraduate photography student at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts at the moment the department was renamed "Photography and Imaging." Secondly, during that same time, September 11, 2001 occurred, whereby Ritchie did what any young photo student would do and immediately took a camera down to the twin towers. There he watched (and photographed) the towers crumble and individuals leap from upper stories to their deaths. To my knowledge he has never shown these photographs to anyone. This was an event that absolutely happened, whether we witness it in photographs or not, an event of such profound human tragedy that it cannot (should not) be commodified, aestheticized, or conceptualized.

And so I will end with the exhibition itself, *Peripheral Vision*, as an opportunity to consider what a perceptual photography can become, as a living photography that takes responsibility for its innate power dynamic and focuses somehow on the liminal space that exists between you and I, between then and now, and between the outer world and the inner life.

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