

What Do We Bring Back?

There was a time when much of the city seemed prepared for me.

Not necessarily welcoming, and not necessarily organised in ways I would have chosen. But its arrangements appeared to possess a certain permanence. Roads led somewhere. Trains arrived and departed. Goods appeared in shops. Doors opened or remained closed. Someone collected what had been left behind. If something broke, sooner or later it was repaired. Much of this required little attention. The city worked best, perhaps, when I did not have to think about how it worked at all.

I began to look at this differently after a difficult period in my own life had ended. The work of regaining stability was already behind me. What remained was a question that seemed simpler than it was: what does it actually mean for life to continue?

I was approaching forty. I knew by then that things could break in ways that had once seemed unlikely. But I had also learnt that continuing was not the same as restoring what had existed before. Nor did stability mean that nothing moved. What appeared stable might depend precisely on things continuing to move.

I began to recognise this in the city.

A delivery before a shop opens. A temporary path around a construction site. A barrier redirecting a body. Tracks being maintained before another train can use them. Cleaning, loading, waiting, repairing. None of these things was new to me. I had seen them for years. What was changing was the relation I understood them to have to one another.

That change became part of why I photographed them.

It is tempting to say that photography taught me to see differently. I am no longer sure that this is quite right. My life had already changed the questions with which I approached what I saw. Photography entered a process that was underway.

What, then, could it add?

Photography can make recognition remarkably efficient. A platform is quickly recognised as a platform, a gate as a gate. Work clothes suggest work; a truck suggests a delivery. Often we have a workable idea of what we are looking at before we have spent much time looking.

There is nothing deficient about this. We could hardly live if every encounter required us to begin again. The world has to become familiar enough for us to move through it. A station must be sufficiently a station for me to find my train. A traffic light must become meaningful quickly enough for me to stop.

Perhaps I had not failed to see these things before. Seeing had already succeeded at something else.

There is, however, a difference between knowing what something is and knowing what there is to see. A photograph can make the first unusually easy. The second may remain open.

Familiarity gives us a way into an image, but it can also give us permission to leave. I know this. I have

seen this before. Nothing more seems necessary.

And yet sometimes we continue.

Not because uncertainty is interesting in itself. Much of what we do not understand gives us no reason to stay with it. What matters is whether looking again begins to make a difference. A relation appears that was not there before. An expectation fails in a way that makes another possible. Something that seemed incidental acquires weight. The result need not be an answer. Sometimes the only progress is that an uncertainty becomes more precise.

Photography does not always need to show us something we have never seen. It can keep something familiar before us long enough for knowing what it is to become insufficient.

A photobook makes this particularly visible. It is not the only photographic form in which this can happen, but its temporal structure makes the process easier to observe.

I turn a page and recognise something. I turn another and recognise something else. But the second image does not arrive alone. Something of the first remains. After several images, repetitions begin to matter. A difference I would have ignored in isolation acquires weight. Something I expected does not appear. A minor element returns. Gradually I form an idea, not always consciously, of what kind of attention this particular work might ask of me.

Drawing on Husserl's concepts of retention and protention, Anja Schürmann has described this temporal movement in the photobook: what has just been perceived remains active while expectation reaches towards what may follow. This helps explain why looking through a book is not simply a succession of independent encounters.

But I wonder whether something else can happen as well.

A later image may not only change what an earlier image means. The accumulating experience may change what I am inclined to notice next.

Seeing and interpretation are difficult to separate here. What I understand affects what I expect; what I expect affects where my attention settles; what I notice can then alter what I understand. The next image meets neither the same expectation nor quite the same viewer.

By the thirtieth photograph, I may therefore not simply know more about the book than I did at the first. A distinction that initially seemed insignificant may now matter. A relation I would once have passed over may have become difficult not to see.

This does not require the photographer to have hidden a lesson inside the sequence. Nor does it require me to arrive at the interpretation the photographer intended. The change may be far less definite. I may simply hesitate where I would previously have moved on.

That hesitation interests me because it suggests that a work can participate in changing the attention through which it is being encountered.

A book has a first page. The viewer does not.

Before I open it, I have already spent years learning what deserves attention. I bring memory, work, habits, knowledge, disappointments, pleasures and countless ordinary encounters with me. I bring a body accustomed to some spaces and uncomfortable in others. I bring things I know professionally and things I have never needed to know. I bring assumptions I can explain and others I do not realise I possess.

A railway worker may understand relations within a station that an art historian does not notice. A commuter may recognise a rhythm that remains invisible to someone encountering the place for the first time.

A work does not meet an educated or an uneducated viewer. It meets a life whose experience overlaps with it in particular ways.

That life continues outside the work. The same book can meet the same person differently years later. Experience can sharpen distinctions, but it can also harden them. More simply, things happen to us.

A photograph that once had little hold on me may later encounter an experience for which I previously had no equivalent. Nothing inside the photograph has changed. Something has happened in my life that now allows a relation to form.

Some works may become legible not because we have looked at them longer, but because life has meanwhile given us something with which to meet them.

This makes it difficult to say how much of the capacity to encounter a work belongs to the work itself. Some of it may emerge while looking. Some must already be there. Some may only become possible years later.

And a biography does not unfold outside history. The things we learn to treat as ordinary change with the world around us. Technologies become mundane, forms of work move between foreground and background, and arrangements that once escaped attention can acquire a different significance.

Photography is peculiar in this respect because it may retain details that neither photographer nor contemporary viewer considered especially important. Years later, one of them can move from the edge of attention towards the centre.

The work therefore does not meet only a person. It meets a person at a particular moment in a world that has also changed.

None of this gives the artist much control over what follows.

An artist can arrange photographs carefully, establish repetitions and interruptions, make one image disturb the apparent certainty of another. But no sequence can determine what a viewer brings to it, or what will happen if that viewer continues.

Difficulty cannot protect a work from criticism. A work cannot claim depth merely because its depth would supposedly become visible to someone patient enough to find it. Repetition does not guarantee meaning. Confusion is not necessarily productive uncertainty. A badly edited book does not become demanding because the viewer has failed to understand it.

The viewer owes the work nothing.

Nor is changed attention necessarily better attention. A photographic work can reinforce a stereotype as easily as unsettle one. It can make one relation newly visible while making another harder to see. A more differentiated attention in one direction may become a narrower one in another.

This uncertainty matters to me when I think about City in Return.

I had begun by thinking about the city largely as something already organised around me. While working with the photographs, that division became harder to maintain. What I was photographing was continuously being supplied, cleaned, crossed, repaired and altered by people who were themselves living within its arrangements.

That understanding had begun in my own life before it entered the work. Once it became part of a photographic sequence, however, it no longer belonged to that life alone.

I wanted the work to carry something of that changed relation: continuation after rupture, and the possibility of inhabiting structures without understanding ourselves only as passive figures within them. But wanting this and communicating it are different things.

A viewer does not need to know why I made the photographs. Someone may encounter the book and think about labour rather than resilience, infrastructure rather than agency. Another may notice forms of exclusion that I underestimated. Someone else may find nothing in it that matters to them.

A viewer might even misunderstand the work and still take something consequential from it. I am not sure that this should always be called misunderstanding.

If a photographic work can only change someone by delivering the interpretation intended by its author, then what we are describing begins to resemble instruction. Art is less controllable than that. The artist can organise an encounter, but cannot own everything that becomes possible within it.

An encounter eventually ends.

The book closes. We leave the exhibition. The images are no longer in front of us. Ordinary perception resumes its practical work. We recognise the street, the platform, the barrier, the person repairing something beside the road, and continue towards wherever we were going.

Most of what we encounter probably disappears into that movement.

But something familiar may no longer close quite as quickly as it once did.

A relation that became meaningful within a work can appear again elsewhere. Not because the work has taught us what the world means, but because seeing and understanding have worked on one another for long enough that recognition no longer exhausts the encounter immediately.

Nothing new has appeared. The worker was already there. The barrier was already there. The system was already operating. So were our own movements within it.

What may have changed is the question with which we meet them.

I do not know how long such a change can last, or whether what seemed consequential inside a work survives beyond it at all. What I now want to ask of a photographic work is therefore not only what it allows me to see while I am with it, but what happens to that way of seeing when the work is no longer there.

What do we bring back?