

Where I Was Able to Stand

On Photography, Access, and Partial Truth

Looking back through *City in Return*, I began to notice how often people appeared small.

They stood on platforms, crossed passages, waited beside tracks or moved through spaces that had already been organised around particular uses. Some were working. Others were travelling, delivering, watching or simply passing through. Around them were barriers, signs, vehicles, stairs, construction sites and larger structures that seemed to continue beyond the frame.

At first, this made me uncomfortable.

Had I made people too small?

Many of the photographs depended on keeping enough of the surrounding space visible for a relation to appear. Isolating a person from that space would often have produced a different photograph entirely. But the same distance that allowed me to see a body in relation to architecture, movement or infrastructure could also make that person appear as a function within a larger order: worker, passenger, delivery rider, pedestrian.

A person is never exhausted by the role through which I happen to encounter them. I knew that. I was less certain what my photographs were doing with it.

The question became more complicated when I began thinking about the distance itself.

For much of this work, I photographed around 40 mm, later often somewhere between 40 and 70 mm. I rarely used long telephoto lenses and did not work with wide-angle lenses. I also used motion blur deliberately. These were not neutral technical choices. They affected how much surrounding space remained, how close a person appeared, how movement entered the image and what kind of relation could become legible.

But the lens was not the first decision.

I rarely entered the city without an idea of what might matter.

I would go to a station, a passage, a construction site or an industrial edge because I thought something I was already considering might become visible there. Movement might meet regulation. A body might enter a prepared route. Labour might appear beside the environment it helped sustain. An interruption might alter an otherwise familiar flow.

In street photography, waiting in a chosen place for something to happen is sometimes called fishing. The word describes part of what I was doing, although not quite all of it. I was not simply waiting for an interesting person to enter an attractive composition. I was looking for places where a relation I was thinking about might become photographically perceptible.

I could choose the place, decide approximately where to stand, select a lens, establish a distance and wait.

What happened next was not mine to decide.

People did not move according to my concept. Someone might stop where I had expected them to continue. A space that seemed promising might remain visually inert. A person could enter a situation in a way that made the relation I had imagined disappear rather than become clearer. At other times, something peripheral could become more consequential than the reason I had gone there in the first place.

This uncertainty matters because my method contains an obvious risk.

If I enter the city already interested in barriers, circulation, maintenance or the relation between bodies and organised space, and deliberately seek places where such relations might appear, I increase the likelihood that I will return with photographs resembling the world I expected to find.

The danger is not fabrication. It is recognition becoming too efficient.

I can become good at recognising my own question.

Photography does not automatically protect me from that. The fact that a person genuinely entered the frame does not mean that the significance I later give the situation existed there in exactly the same form before I arrived.

What keeps the process open is the possibility that the world does not fit.

Sometimes the expected relation never materialises. Sometimes another one takes its place. Sometimes the photograph I thought I was waiting for becomes impossible because of what people actually do.

I do not go into the city without expectations, but the city is not obliged to confirm them.

And even this description begins too late.

Before I wait for anything to happen, I first have to be somewhere.

A pavement is available to me. A station admits me. A fence stops me. A door requires permission. An industrial site may remain visible only from outside. A security rule may limit where a camera can be used. Another person may allow me closer, turn away, change their behaviour when they notice the camera or tell me to leave.

Where I stand is therefore not entirely my decision.

The photograph is shaped not only by where I choose to stand, but by where I am able to stand.

From there, the instrument changes what that position can become photographically.

A longer lens can bring something visually closer without bringing my body closer. A particular shutter speed can turn movement into a trace. A 40 mm frame establishes another relation between a person and their surroundings than a wide-angle view or a distant telephoto image would.

The camera does not simply receive a position. It gives that position a form.

But another limit comes earlier.

What remains outside a photograph may have been excluded because I composed the image that way. It may also remain outside because I could never occupy the position from which it would have entered.

In that sense, the frame begins before the frame.

Access has already organised what can become visible.

Once I began thinking about this, the small figures in my photographs became less easy for me to interpret.

A person's location in an image may be visible with considerable precision. Their experience of that location is not.

I may photograph someone standing before an entrance. I can record the distance between their body and the door, the direction in which they are looking, whether they move or remain still. I may know that a sign is present or that a barrier divides the space.

But I do not thereby acquire their experience of the situation.

The photograph gives another person's visible position to me while keeping their experience of that position largely inaccessible.

Even a place as apparently straightforward as a station becomes more complicated under this distinction.

The station is materially there. Its tracks, stairs, entrances and signs do not depend on my interpretation. A gate can be closed at that moment. A train can depart according to a timetable.

I do not think photography becomes more serious by denying such facts.

But a shared material arrangement does not necessarily create the same practical possibilities for everyone who enters it.

A regular commuter may move through the station almost without conscious orientation. Someone unfamiliar with it may have to read every sign. A route that is ordinary for one body may be unusable for another.

The station has not become several different stations. What differs is the relation between a particular person and what the arrangement makes possible.

Some differences are less visible. Familiarity, language, previous experience or social expectation may affect whether a person recognises a possibility at all, or whether a formally accessible place is experienced as available.

These differences should not be collapsed into one vague idea of subjectivity. A physical barrier is not the same as uncertainty about whether one is welcome. A legal restriction is not the same as not knowing that another entrance exists. Otherwise material and social differences can disappear into the harmless language of differing perspectives.

At the same time, none of these conditions becomes fully available to me simply because I photograph the person encountering them.

I remain on my side of the camera.

I bring my own habits, knowledge, expectations and blind spots. Some relations become noticeable to me because of what I have already learned to look for. Others may remain ordinary enough to disappear from my attention.

Donna Haraway's writing on situated knowledge became useful to me here, not because it offers another way of saying that everyone has a point of view. More important is its refusal of an imagined view from nowhere. Knowledge does not become more responsible by pretending that the conditions of seeing have disappeared. A partial perspective can still make claims about a shared world, but those claims become more accountable when the conditions and limits of the position are acknowledged.

This seems more useful to me than simply calling photography subjective.

Subjectivity can become an alibi: that was simply how I saw it.

A position invites more specific questions.

Why was I there? Why could I stand there? What had I gone there expecting to see? What did the camera make available from that distance — and what could never enter because I could not reach the position from which it might have appeared?

These questions do not make a photograph less real. They narrow the claim I can responsibly make for it.

A photograph can contain something true without containing the truth of the whole situation.

Someone stood there. A gate was closed at that moment. A person crossed a particular space. A person moved through a particular entrance.

Those things do not become false because the photograph is partial.

Partiality is not the opposite of truth. The problem begins when a fragment forgets that it is a fragment.

I have asked elsewhere how far visible effects within a photograph can support claims about larger systems. The question here begins one step earlier.

Before I ask what a photograph allows me to infer about an order beyond the frame, I have to ask why this particular part of the order became photographically available to me at all.

That question includes access, but also the concept with which I entered the city, the places I considered worth visiting, the distance I preferred to maintain, the instrument through which that distance became an image, and the actions of other people, which I could anticipate only incompletely.

This last point complicates the idea of photographic position further.

The people I photograph are not passive material waiting to complete an image. They can notice me or not notice me. They can look towards the camera, turn away, move closer, leave, hesitate, continue as before or change what they are doing because a camera has become part of the situation.

Their actions can make the photograph I anticipated possible or undo it immediately.

But this does not make our positions symmetrical.

They may influence the encounter. I decide whether that encounter becomes an exposure. I later decide whether the exposure is kept, selected and shown.

The uncertainty of the moment does not remove the photographer's particular responsibility for what survives it.

The difference is that I held the camera.

Holding it gave me the ability to transform one brief visible relation into something that could persist beyond the situation in which it occurred.

The person in the image does not necessarily know which fraction of a second remained. They do not necessarily know what other photographs I made, which one I selected or what relationships it would later acquire within my work.

My partial position therefore carries a capacity that theirs may not.

It does not make my interpretation more complete. It makes my responsibility for the fragment greater.

Later, a viewer approaches the photograph from another position again.

They may know the station better than I did. They may recognise a practical restriction I missed. They may interpret a gesture differently, resist the category into which I had placed a person or notice something I treated as incidental.

None of this gives them automatic access to the photographed person's experience either.

Another partial position does not complete mine, but it may expose something I had treated as complete.

There may be no position from which all of these relations become available at once.

Photography does not have to solve that problem in order to matter. A photograph can carry one real but limited encounter into another encounter, where something I had overlooked may become more difficult to ignore.

When I return now to the small figures in *City in Return*, I no longer think the first question is whether I should have made them larger.

Their scale came partly from the photographs I was trying to make. I wanted enough of the surrounding world to remain visible for a relation between body, movement and structure to exist.

That does not make their smallness innocent.

A person occupying little space in a photograph can easily become legible through the larger order around them: worker, passenger, user, passer-by.

The photograph cannot guarantee that the person will not be reduced to the relation that made me raise the camera. What I can resist is pretending that the relation exhausts them.

The same restraint applies to everything around them.

I photographed from positions I selected, but did not create alone. I arrived with questions. Those questions had already made certain places more likely to attract me. Access opened some positions and withheld others. The camera gave a particular form to the place I could occupy. The people there acted without belonging to my idea of them.

Only then did the rectangular frame appear.

I used to think primarily about what I chose to include inside it.

I am now less certain that this is where selection begins.

Before I looked through the viewfinder, my attention had already been directed. My body had already reached one place rather than another. Someone or something had already made that place accessible. The lens had already established a possible distance. The situation had already begun to develop without waiting for me.

The photograph came afterwards.

So when I raise the camera now, the question is no longer only what I can see from where I am standing.

It begins slightly earlier.

Where was I able to stand?

Reference

Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 575–599.