

What Form Will This Work Survive?

On Compression, Translation, and Institutional Uptake in Photography

How much of an artwork do we actually need to have seen before we feel that we know it?

Is an installation view of an exhibition we never entered enough? Three spreads from a photobook? A short excerpt from a performance? Fifteen photographs from a project that contains many more?

We know, of course, that such fragments are not identical with the work. Still, we begin very quickly to form an idea of it through them. We remember them, talk about them, place them. Sometimes the decision about whether we want to see more has already been made at this point.

For many works, this is almost unavoidable. We first encounter them as reproductions, PDFs, catalogue pages, or documentation. A work can circulate for a long time before anyone has the chance to meet it in the form in which it was actually made.

What interests me is the point at which this reduced form stops merely mediating the work and has to stand in for it.

An editor sees a few pages before knowing the book. A jury considers a selection. A curator sees photographs of an installation before entering the space. In each of these situations, what comes first is something meant to represent the work.

That some reduction has to take place is obvious. Less obvious is whether different works actually lose the same things under the same conditions.

It is useful here to look more closely at complexity.

A work is not complex simply because it is difficult to understand. Theoretically dense work can sometimes be grasped surprisingly quickly. Conversely, individual images can seem immediately accessible while what develops between them is much harder to pin down.

It is this second kind of complexity that interests me most.

In a photobook, an image may acquire meaning partly because a related motif appeared many pages earlier. A later photograph may alter the way we remember an earlier one. Repetition, distance, variation, interruption, and displacement can become as much a part of the work as the photographs themselves. In an installation, space and scale may perform a similar function; in a performance, duration.

Remove one element and what remains is not always simply a smaller version of the same work. Sometimes the relation between the parts changes as well.

Two very different photographic bodies of work make this clear.

For decades, Bernd and Hilla Becher photographed industrial structures with extraordinary consistency: water towers, winding towers, blast furnaces, silos, cooling towers, and other functional architectures. Frontal viewpoints, comparable light, and a largely constant organization of the image allowed individual structures to be read against one another in typological groups.

Meaning emerges between the photographs here too. A single winding tower does not explain the typology. Similarities and deviations only become apparent through repetition. Yet an

important part of the method can already be understood from a relatively small group. In *Winding Towers*, for example, nine photographs are enough for the organizing rule of the group to become visible. The consistency of representation enables comparison while making the differences between the individual structures more pronounced.[1]

W. Eugene Smith's Pittsburgh project works differently.

In 1955, Smith was initially commissioned to spend three weeks photographing Pittsburgh and to deliver roughly one hundred photographs for a book by Stefan Lorant. The assignment grew into a project lasting about a year and producing around 20,000 images.[2] Over time, Smith became less concerned with recording separate aspects of a city. Industry and labour, social difference, architecture, everyday life, landscape, and human experience were meant to come together within a photographic essay.

The individual photographs are not difficult to access. The harder question is which group of them can stand for the work at all. Emphasize one area more strongly and the Pittsburgh that emerges from the edit changes with it.

The difference from the Bechers is therefore not that only one of these bodies of work is relational. Both are. But their relations can be compressed to different degrees. With the Bechers, a small group can already make an essential part of the method visible. With Smith, more depends on which parts of the city are placed in relation to one another and which disappear from the selection.

How complex a work is, then, tells us surprisingly little about how well that complexity can be compressed.

I first encountered this as a practical problem in my own photographic work.

For an extended period, I had been working on a project about the city that moved between very different areas: infrastructure and human presence, labour and consumption, transit and stillness, access and exclusion, supply, regulation, history, and the traces people leave within these systems.

I never thought of these as separate themes from which one would eventually emerge as the real subject. What interested me was precisely their coexistence and their dependence on one another. A city, after all, does not confront us only as architecture or as a social stage, only as a transport system, a workplace, or a set of rules. It is made from the overlap of all of them.

The difficulty began when the long work had to become a selection of ten or fifteen photographs.

At first, of course, the questions were about pictures. Which ones hold up? Which ones does the sequence need? What can I leave out? But fairly quickly I realized that I was making another decision at the same time: which part of the work would become more visible within that selection.

Include more situations with people and social relationships move forward; the work becomes easier to read in documentary terms. Concentrate more heavily on infrastructure and architecture and its conceptual side becomes stronger. Transit images can make mobility look almost like the main subject. Thresholds, signs, and barriers can shift the emphasis toward access and control. Labour and consumption would produce another weighting again.

None of these readings would have been wrong.

That was precisely the problem.

What could coexist in the full project had to be weighted in a short selection. Some connections became clearer; others weakened or almost disappeared. I was not simply removing material. I was redistributing emphasis within the work.

This seems to me an important distinction, and one that short portfolios can easily conceal.

Compression creates focus. And the moment something is brought into focus, a provisional decision is also being made about what should appear especially important in the work.

For projects built around a single formal or thematic axis, this may work relatively well. It becomes more difficult when breadth is not merely a matter of scale but part of what the subject means. If social experience, infrastructure, movement, economics, and regulation are not meant to be cleanly separated, then a highly convincing edit of one area may simultaneously make part of that entanglement disappear.

A selection therefore does more than stand in for the work. Through what it preserves and what it omits, it already proposes a particular reading.

That can also affect how the work is subsequently classified.

Street Photography? Documentary Photography? Conceptual Photography? Urban Photography? A photographic essay?

These labels do not alter the work, but they do alter the expectations with which it is approached. Different qualities are looked for under Street Photography than under Documentary Photography. With conceptual work, the method moves more strongly into the foreground. Once something is understood as a photobook, sequence itself may become an essential part of the judgment.

None of these perspectives has to be inappropriate. Each simply directs attention differently.

Compression can therefore make certain qualities of a work especially visible. Those qualities may suggest a particular category, and the category in turn can influence which aspects are later understood as central. What begins as a practical decision for a portfolio or an application may gradually settle into a more stable reading of the work.

In the social sciences, Wendy Nelson Espeland and Mitchell L. Stevens have examined a related process under the term *commensuration*: the comparison of different entities through a common metric.[3]

What interests me here is the step before that comparison.

Works are often not compared in their full form. They first have to be translated into representations that can be placed next to one another at all: ten or fifteen images, a handful of sample pages, a PDF, a text with a fixed word count, an installation view, a project category.

A common form is created.

But that form does not act on every work in the same way.

Fifteen photographs may produce a remarkably stable extract from one project. In another, the same number may remove precisely the transitions, repetitions, or thematic tensions that hold it together. Formally, the requirement is identical. What disappears can be very different.

This raises another question: what allows someone else to take the work further?

I use *institutional uptake* here in a deliberately practical sense. Can an editor develop an article from what is in front of them? Can a curator imagine how the work might enter a spatial or programmatic context? Can a gallery communicate a position and represent it over time? Can a foundation make a convincing case for supporting this particular work?

Uptake, in that sense, is not something a work simply possesses regardless of circumstance. It emerges between the work, the form in which it currently appears, and an actor who might be able to do something further with it.

A publication needs something that can become a publication. An exhibition has to be spatially and financially possible. A foundation has limited resources to distribute; a gallery has to sustain its activity economically. Artists, too, want their work to have the opportunity to be seen at all.

For that reason, asking whether the art world restricts art seems too blunt.

More interesting is which properties of a work make the transition from one situation to another easier, and which are less easily carried across.

A clear initial point of entry can do a great deal. A single image can provide one, as can a precisely articulated idea or a recognizable human situation. Empathy can open such a path as well. A face or a particular biography can lead into a complicated set of relations without reducing them to a simple statement.

Some complex works simply offer an entrance that survives translation better than others.

That is not automatically a problem. A work may gain from making a difficult set of relations accessible. Being hard to mediate is not a mark of quality, and obscurity is not the same thing as ambiguity. Creating an entrance without determining the exit in advance can be a strength.

Things become more sensitive when experiences of successful mediation begin to feed back into later decisions.

Artists see which images are selected, which descriptions work, which categories open doors, and which kinds of work are easier to publish or exhibit. No one has to issue an instruction. A jury can judge carefully, an editor can make perfectly understandable decisions, and a gallery can have good reasons for continuing with certain positions.

Still, something remains from those experiences.

An editor is more likely to continue with work that can be meaningfully communicated in the publication. An institution has to select projects that can be realized within its spatial, financial, and communicative limits. A gallery can only sustain a position if, under its own conditions, it can see a longer-term possibility for it.

From the perspective of any one actor, none of this is surprising. Taken together, however, it also produces knowledge about what travels more easily from one situation to the next.

That knowledge does not necessarily remain outside production.

If certain extracts of a work repeatedly prove especially effective, the next selection may be made differently. Perhaps the question of later mediation begins to enter earlier. A category chosen at first only for an application can gradually find its way into one's own understanding of what kind of work one is making.

This does not have to happen consciously, or completely. That may be precisely why it is so difficult to locate.

Alongside the question of what form a work needs for its own development, another can eventually appear:

Which of its qualities will survive the situations in which it will later be mediated, compared, and selected?

For me, this is the more sensitive form of institutional influence.

It requires no single actor to prescribe an aesthetic direction. Repeated translations and decisions are enough for experience to accumulate around what can be carried forward easily.

This need not produce less complex art. It may instead give an advantage to certain kinds of complexity: work whose point of entry, formal rule, or central idea can be detached relatively well from a larger whole.

Other works lose more of what holds them together under the same conditions.

Calling this censorship would be far too dramatic. A simple story of loss would also be inadequate. Art has always worked with its conditions, used them, responded to them, and changed them. A work that refused every form of translation would not automatically be freer. It would probably just be harder to see.

The question begins where neither complete autonomy nor frictionless mediation offers a satisfying answer.

How can a work become accessible without giving up precisely those relations from which its meaning emerges?

How can it move between artists, editors, institutions, and viewers without gradually becoming defined above all by the qualities that are easiest to carry forward?

Perhaps the decisive question is not whether a work should be easy to carry forward.

It is whether a work can remain open to being carried forward without being made for that purpose.

Notes

[1] See The Museum of Modern Art, New York, “Bernd Becher, Hilla Becher: *Winding Towers*, 1966–97,” collection entry, on the presentation of the nine photographs as a typological grid and the comparative function of their consistent visual treatment. See also *MoMA Highlights: 375 Works from The Museum of Modern Art, New York*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2019.

[2] See Sam Stephenson, ed., *Dream Street: W. Eugene Smith’s Pittsburgh Project*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023. The original commission called for roughly three weeks in Pittsburgh and about one hundred photographs for Stefan Lorant’s book; it developed into a project lasting around a year and producing approximately 20,000 images.

[3] Wendy Nelson Espeland and Mitchell L. Stevens, “Commensuration as a Social Process,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 24, 1998, pp. 313–343, DOI: 10.1146/annurev.soc.24.1.313.