

What Can a Photograph Know About a System?

On Visible Effects, Unseen Conditions, and the Limits of Photographic Evidence

I took a photograph in a pedestrian area in a German city.

On the left, high on a pole, a surveillance camera points across the square. People move beneath it. Near the center, a delivery rider stopped with his bicycle. He seems to be looking at his phone. On the right, a truck stands with its rear open. The cargo space appears empty.

I had already been photographing cities for some time, and the things in the image belonged easily to questions I was following. Delivery, movement, access, observation. Looking at the photograph later, it was tempting to read the scene as a small concentration of systems that usually remain separate in thought but meet in ordinary urban space.

That may be partly true. But their coexistence inside my frame does not tell me how closely they are connected.

The first doubt came from something that barely enters the photograph.

At the far right edge, a small part of a market stall is visible. The market itself continued beyond the frame.

I no longer remember whether I knew who the truck belonged to. I cannot say with certainty that it served one of the market stalls. It seems likely, but likelihood is already different from what the photograph itself shows.

Once I remember what that fragment belonged to, however, the truck changes slightly. What looked like a general sign of urban logistics acquires a much more immediate possible explanation. Perhaps somebody had simply unloaded goods for a stall a few meters beyond the edge of my image.

The truck was there. The market was there too. What I cannot recover from the photograph alone is the relation between them.

I could have included more.

A wider lens might have brought more of the market into view. I might have stepped backwards or chosen another position. Then truck and stalls could perhaps have appeared together and the relation between them would have seemed more obvious.

But another question would have begun immediately. Where had the goods come from? Why was the market taking place on that square? What allowed delivery vehicles into a pedestrian area otherwise organized around people on foot?

At some point there would have been another edge.

Every photograph has one. What interests me here is not simply that framing excludes. It is that what remains outside may contain part of what would help us understand what remains inside.

Changing focal length does not remove this difficulty. A photograph made from higher up could show more of the surrounding streets. From the air, an entire district might become visible. The city would appear as a larger arrangement of buildings, roads and movement.

We would see more.

I am not sure we would necessarily understand more.

Some relations do not become visible by increasing distance. Ownership cannot be photographed simply by fitting an entire property into the frame. Regulation does not become legible because the street it applies to can be seen from end to end. The organization behind a delivery is not contained in the amount of pavement surrounding the vehicle.

The same problem appears at close range. A worn threshold can show use. A sign can show that someone has formulated a rule. A camera can show that equipment for observing space has been installed.

What produced those conditions may be somewhere else.

This became increasingly important to me because I had begun to use words such as system, infrastructure and order when thinking about my own photographs.

They helped me understand why ordinary objects did not always feel isolated. A barrier belongs to a way of organizing passage. A loading area exists because something has to arrive or leave. A timetable makes a larger coordination locally visible.

But those words also create a risk. The larger structure can begin to feel present in the photograph simply because one of its effects is present.

The delivery rider is a good example.

I can see the bicycle, the bag and the phone. His clothing and equipment make it reasonable to understand him as someone making deliveries. I also remember that he stopped only briefly and appeared to orient himself.

Beyond that, the photograph becomes less helpful.

I do not know what he was looking at on the screen. I cannot see whether he had received an order, was checking an address or reading something unrelated to work. Knowledge about the company and the way delivery platforms operate might make some interpretations more plausible, but that information would have entered from somewhere beyond this particular encounter.

That does not make it irrelevant. It simply matters where it comes from.

The same is true of the camera on the left.

I know that a camera was mounted there and directed towards the square. Describing it as a surveillance camera is reasonable, but the word already carries a more complete picture of its function than the photograph can give me.

I do not know from the image whether it recorded continuously. I do not know where the images went, whether anyone watched them or how long anything might have been retained.

The photograph gives me a reason to ask those questions. It does not answer them.

This is perhaps where photography becomes most useful to me. I do not always need to understand a situation before making an image of it. A relation can catch my attention before I know what produced it. I can photograph something because it seems unresolved rather than because I have already decided what it means.

The problem comes later, when explanation begins to run ahead of what the photograph can support.

Research can narrow that distance.

A document may tell me who owns a building. Someone working at a site may explain the function of an entrance. A municipal plan may clarify why the street was reorganized. A caption can identify a place or an event that would otherwise remain unclear.

But additional context does not simply fill empty spaces in a photograph.

It also directs attention.

The same truck described as a vehicle serving a local market will be encountered differently from the same truck described as logistics traffic within a pedestrian zone. The first caption brings the event beside the frame into the image. The second connects the vehicle to a broader idea of movement and supply.

Both may contain something true.

They do not ask about the same thing as the photograph.

This is why I have become suspicious of the idea that enough context eventually makes an image complete. Context also has an author. It can clarify, but it can just as easily emphasize, omit or steer.

The photograph itself is no neutral refuge from that problem. I chose the position and the moment. I placed the camera where I did. Later I decided that this exposure should remain.

Still, the world in front of me did not exist because I chose it.

The rider stopped whether or not I understood why.

The truck was open.

Most of the market was taking place beyond the frame.

The distinction matters to me because I do not want uncertainty to become another way of saying that nothing can be known.

Some things remain relatively secure because they are visible in the photograph. Others survive only in my memory of making it. They do not carry the same kind of certainty.

I remember the market clearly. I remember the rider stopping. I no longer remember whether I knew anything about the truck.

The uncertainty grows further when I begin to connect these things.

For me, the photograph begins with something more stubborn: something was there. But only part of it entered the frame, and what entered the frame did not bring all of its relations with it.

I encounter this limitation in another form whenever I try to move beyond public space.

From a street I can usually photograph a façade, sometimes an entrance, a station concourse or part of a loading area.

Then there is a door.

Behind it may be another part of the same place: offices, storage, technical rooms, staff areas, control spaces. Sometimes access is possible. Sometimes it is not.

The distinction is not absolute. A door closed to me may be an ordinary passage for someone who works there. A loading area that marks the limit of my access may be another person's workplace. The same building therefore reveals different things depending on who approaches it and from which position.

This changed the way I thought about visibility.

A system does not simply possess a public surface and a hidden interior. Its visibility is distributed unevenly among the people moving through it.

The passenger sees one railway.

The driver, technician or cleaner encounters another.

None of them necessarily sees the whole.

For a photographer who usually enters these environments from public space, this matters. I may repeatedly photograph the points at which an organisation becomes visible to someone standing outside it: an entrance, a delivery, a barrier, a waiting area.

Those surfaces are real. They also reflect my position in relation to them.

This is not a reason to dismiss them.

A regulation eventually has to acquire some form if it is to affect movement. Goods have to arrive somewhere. A rule may become a sign or a gate. Decisions made in rooms I cannot enter can still alter the spaces through which I move.

Photography can stay with those points of contact.

Perhaps what I had been calling a photograph of a system was sometimes better understood as a photograph of where a larger organization becomes local.

That is already a great deal.

It simply leaves open the question of what else would be needed before the local manifestation could stand for the larger whole.

The answer will not always be the same. One photograph may carry more than another. A caption or piece of research may make a connection much firmer. And sometimes, after looking and researching, I still do not know.

That does not make the encounter worthless.

It changes the size of the claim I am willing to make from it.

When I recently returned to the photograph of the square, however, I found myself looking less at the truck than at the camera on the left.

I had originally treated it as another element within the space: bollards, deliveries, pedestrian movement, observation. It seemed to belong to the organization I was trying to photograph.

Only later did I notice the reversal that had been there from the beginning.

While I was photographing the square, I was also standing within the field of another camera.

There is nothing entirely new about one person photographing another. An imbalance already exists in ordinary photography. I know what is inside my frame. Someone passing through it usually does not. I know which exposure I keep and what I will later do with it.

With the camera on the pole, my position was different.

I knew where it was, but very little about what happened beyond that visible fact.

Perhaps it recorded me. Perhaps it did not. Perhaps nobody ever looked. Perhaps looking was not the only thing an image from it could have been used for.

I do not need to know the answer for the difference to matter.

I had been asking what my photograph could tell me about an organization larger than its frame.

The camera at the edge of the image returns the same problem from the other side.

I know a great deal about the photograph I made that day: where I stood, why I stopped, what I chose to include and why the image remained.

About the possible image made from the other direction, I know almost nothing.