

What Fear Removed

On Photography, Distance, and What a Frame Cannot Know

For several months, three people were missing from a photograph in which they had been standing.

I made the image at night on Hamburg's Reeperbahn. The camera was close to the ground. Discarded plastic cups, straws and pieces of melting ice filled the foreground. Behind them, people moved along the pavement. Some entered a club. Others passed without stopping. Across the street, a woman stood near a doorway. At the edge of the frame, two people remained near another entrance while the crowd moved around them.

I removed all three later.

Not because they disturbed the composition. Their positions were part of what held the image together. I removed them because I was afraid.

While I was photographing the crowd, several men came out of a nearby establishment and approached me. I had not known who they were. I had not been trying to make portraits of them. They apparently believed otherwise.

One of the men seized me by the collar and pulled me into a side street. There I was told, in unmistakable terms, that doormen and sex workers were not photographed in that area. One never knew, they said, who owned which establishment or what connections stood behind it. I was warned not to photograph on Hans-Albers-Platz if I did not want to be assaulted.

I took the warning seriously.

The distinction had seemed clear to me. I had photographed a crowd. They believed I had photographed them. Yet the distinction was clear only because I could see the frame. They could not.

The photographer sees an image taking shape. The person in front of the camera sees a lens pointing in their direction.

Through the viewfinder, I knew how large or small each person appeared, whether a face was sharp, and how individual figures related to the entrances, the pavement and the movement around them. The people in front of the camera knew none of this. They could not know whether they were central or incidental, recognizable or blurred, the subject of the image or part of a wider situation. Nor could they know which photograph I might choose or where it might later appear.

At the same time, I knew almost nothing about them.

I knew where I was. I did not know who they were.

The Reeperbahn seems to arrive with its own explanations. It is a place of entertainment and sex work, employment and tourism, celebration and control. People wait, work, meet, watch one another or simply pass through. These activities occupy the same streets and cannot reliably be distinguished from a body, a gesture or a position near a doorway.

Yet the name of the place begins to interpret the people within it. A person standing outside a club is not encountered in the same way as the same person standing outside a railway station or a hospital. The location becomes an unwritten caption. Before the photograph tells us anything, the place has already made certain stories more available than others.

A photograph is not empty of knowledge. Someone really stood there. A body turned, waited or moved. Some people entered while others continued along the street. Distances existed. The entrances organized movement in a particular way.

But none of this tells us who a person is.

When I began photographing in public space, distance was partly a practical choice. I was a newcomer. It felt easier to observe an existing situation than to approach strangers and establish an immediate relationship with them. There was another reason as well. I did not want people to take on an additional pose for my camera.

This was the form of honesty I was looking for.

I did not believe that people who failed to notice the camera became free of performance. We present ourselves constantly: to friends, colleagues, partners, customers, strangers and to our own idea of who we want to be. The Reeperbahn may make some of these performances more visible, but it does not create them.

I wanted only not to add the photographer as another audience.

I knew that the frame was mine. I wanted what happened within it not to happen for me.

A photograph can be constructed without the behaviour within it having been directed. The camera position, the moment, the focus and the boundaries of the image are decisions. So are the later conversion to black and white and the final selection. The people may not have posed, but the photograph did not make itself.

In this image, I placed the camera low enough for the discarded cups and melting ice to dominate the foreground. The people behind them became less individual and more closely bound to the flow of the street. Distance and movement softened their faces. Removing colour shifted attention away from the immediate attraction of illuminated signs and clothing towards bodies, surfaces, light and spatial relation.

None of these choices brought me closer to an objective truth. They produced a particular way of seeing.

I can see how people occupy a space, how they relate to a doorway, how one person remains still while others pass. I cannot see into them. I cannot know what brought them there, what they were thinking or what the moment meant within the larger course of their lives.

The rest enters through interpretation.

After the confrontation, I opened the photograph in Lightroom and used an AI-assisted removal tool to make the three figures disappear. The software replaced them with plausible fragments of pavement, architecture and darkness. Nothing in the altered image revealed that anyone had ever stood there.

The edit contained no trace of fear.

This is one of the peculiar qualities of digital image editing. It does not merely allow a decision to be made. It can conceal that a decision was ever necessary. The surface closes over the intervention. What remains does not look like an altered version of the scene. It looks like a photograph of another scene.

I had wanted to disturb the situation as little as possible. The situation did not leave the photograph undisturbed.

The people who confronted me had not seen the frame. Their reaction entered it nevertheless. What began as a threat in the street continued later as a decision at my computer. Fear determined who could remain visible after the immediate danger had passed.

Removing the figures made the image feel safer to me. It also changed what the place meant.

The three people had not merely occupied space. Their positions helped organize it. The two figures near the entrance marked a threshold around which others moved. The woman across the street belonged to the wider relation between doorway, pavement and passing crowd. Without them, the buildings remained, but the social structure of the entrances weakened.

The edit did not only remove people. It reorganized the place.

For some time, I left the altered version as it was. Months later, I returned to the original.

Time had not changed what had happened. It had changed my ability to look at the photograph without seeing it only as a continuation of the threat. I could ask more carefully what was actually visible.

The figures were recognizable as people within the scene. Their statures, clothing and positions could be seen. Their faces, however, did not contain enough detail for reliable individual identification. They were present without becoming portraits.

I restored them.

This did not resolve the ethical question. It did not prove that leaving them visible was simply right or that removing them had been wrong. The first decision had been made under fear. The later one was made with greater distance, but distance does not make a decision innocent.

I later knew that the two people near the entrance were working the door. The photograph alone does not provide that knowledge. A viewer may infer it from their position and posture. The woman across the street may likewise be assigned a role because of where she stands, how she appears or what the Reeperbahn is assumed to mean. Her actual reason for being there remains unknown.

A person may be impossible to identify by name and still be easy to categorize.

Anonymity does not prevent typification. It may make it easier.

When facial detail recedes, a body can become a function: doorman, door staff, customer, sex worker, tourist, passer-by. A person may be protected from individual recognition while becoming more available to social classification. We do not know who someone is, yet the category can feel certain.

This is where the honesty of an unposed moment reaches its limit.

The photograph may be honest about a visible arrangement. It may show that someone stood near an entrance while others entered or passed. But it cannot confirm every role a viewer may derive from that arrangement. A moment can be unposed without the person within it becoming known.

Being visible in public does not remove this difficulty. A photograph takes a moment out of the conditions in which it occurred and carries it elsewhere: from a pavement to a screen, from one night into an indefinite future, from the background of a crowd into another person's attention.

The original frame may not remain the final one. A figure who appeared small within a wider scene can later be enlarged, cropped and isolated. The photographer may understand the subject as a relation between bodies and space, while another viewer turns one person into its centre.

Invisibility has its own politics. It may protect someone whose identification would cause harm. It may also protect people or structures that do not want their activities examined. On the Reeperbahn, I could not know which concerns belonged to whom. The use of physical force did not make the warning morally authoritative. But it showed that visibility could have consequences I did not understand.

The encounter brought two very different forms of power into contact. I had the power to frame, preserve and later publish. They had the physical power to stop me, frighten me and influence what the image would contain. Neither side possessed complete knowledge. Each acted partly through what it imagined the other might do.

This may be the most difficult aspect of photographic distance. It changes the relationship without removing it.

Distance can reduce the likelihood that someone will pose. It can keep the surrounding space visible and resist turning every human presence into an intimate portrait. Yet it can also delay the moment in which someone realizes that an image is being made. What feels like restraint from behind the camera may feel like unaccountable observation from the other side.

There is no distance from which this contradiction disappears.

Responsibility therefore does not end when the shutter is released. It continues through editing, selection, captioning and publication. Removing a person may protect them, protect the photographer or alter the truth of the observed relation. Leaving someone visible may preserve what occurred and expose that person to meanings they did not choose.

The image alone cannot decide between these possibilities.

Perhaps the task is not to eliminate interpretation, but to prevent it from presenting itself as knowledge. A photograph may show where someone stood without knowing why. It may preserve a gesture without possessing the life to which that gesture belonged. It may make a person visible while leaving something essential beyond the reach of the image.

This is not necessarily a failure of photography. It may be one of the conditions under which photography can remain responsible.

I cannot tell the viewer who the people in this photograph were. Nor does uncertainty mean that every interpretation is equally valid. The entrances, the crowd and the bodies establish real relations. But those relations are not complete identities.

My hope for the image is more modest.

A viewer may notice how quickly a location becomes a biography, how readily a position near a doorway becomes a social role, or how easily an indistinct figure becomes someone we believe we understand.

Perhaps it is enough if the photograph does not confirm that certainty too quickly.

The three people remain in the image now. Their faces are indistinct. Their presence is not. They stand again within the situation in which I encountered them: not as portraits and not as

explanations, but as people whose relation to the place mattered without becoming fully knowable.

Putting them back did not make the photograph innocent.

It only made visible again what fear had removed.