

## **What Does a Moment Leave Unfinished?**

### *On Photography, Process, and the Time Beyond the Frame*

There is a photograph of a road worker standing beside a traffic sign. His head is lowered. One arm is raised, his hand close to the pole. Behind him is a work vehicle. I can describe these things with some confidence. What I find harder to describe is what is happening.

Has he just put the sign there? Is he adjusting it? Is he about to remove it? For a moment, the position of his body even makes the gesture look strangely ceremonial, as though he were bowing towards the sign rather than working on it. I know that this is probably not what happened. The photograph does not resolve the uncertainty.

It preserved the gesture more clearly than it preserved the action.

At first, this seems like an ordinary limitation of photography. A still image interrupts an event. Whatever happened before the exposure is no longer visible, and whatever followed had not yet entered it. The photograph gives me a fragment and leaves the rest outside.

Looking at the image again, however, I noticed that the missing time did not simply disappear.

I began to replace it.

The man must have arrived somehow. The sign may have been moved. His raised arm seems to belong to an action already under way or about to continue. I begin constructing a before and an after even though neither is visible.

Why does a fragment invite this so readily?

I often photograph moving people, sometimes using an exposure long enough for their bodies to lose their clear contours. A bus becomes a horizontal trace. Someone walking through a station remains partly recognisable and partly dissolved. In these photographs, time seems more obviously present.

The exposure has not isolated a mathematical instant. It has accumulated a short interval. Something changed position while the shutter was open, and that change entered the image.

Still, this does not give me the whole process.

The blurred bus tells me that movement occurred during the exposure. It does not tell me where the journey began or where it ended. A blurred body can make duration visible without revealing why someone was moving, where they were going, or what happened once they left the frame.

The photograph may contain duration without containing the process to which that duration belongs.

Movement and process are not the same thing.

The process to which a movement belongs may extend far beyond the interval in which that movement becomes photographically visible. It may involve preparation, repetition, interruption, consequences, other people, or circumstances that never enter the frame. Even a photograph filled

with motion can offer only a small part of it.

And some photographs contain no visible blur at all.

They can still feel temporally open.

A body leaning into a gesture, a hand still raised, a door partly open, material arranged around a place of work, a surface that has been opened but not yet closed again — sometimes the configuration itself makes the moment difficult to understand as complete.

It does not show what will happen. It gives the situation a direction without fulfilling it.

The road worker is like this. His posture seems to belong to something rather than merely to be there. Yet the photograph does not tell me whether I am looking at the end of an action, its middle, or its beginning.

This became clearer when I looked at much more ordinary situations.

Two people standing in front of a shop window may be completely sharp. Nothing in the image needs to demonstrate movement. Still, I recognise something familiar in their position. They may be looking, comparing, deciding, waiting for one another. They will probably not remain there indefinitely.

I know this not because the photograph contains their future, but because I have stood in front of shop windows myself. I have watched other people do the same.

The image encounters previous experience.

Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann describe everyday life as something we do not encounter afresh at every moment. We rely on a stock of knowledge formed through experience and shared social understanding. Familiar situations arrive with familiar possibilities.

Something similar happens when I look at a photograph.

I do not see only a pole, a hand, a body and a vehicle. I recognise a road worker beside a traffic sign. Once that recognition has occurred, certain actions become plausible. Signs are installed, checked, moved and removed.

The visible configuration begins to suggest a temporal continuation.

Yet familiarity can make this deceptively easy.

The more familiar the pattern, the easier it becomes to confuse a plausible continuation with an observed one.

The worker may have been installing the sign. He may also have been doing something else. The photograph gives some interpretations more support than others, but it does not contain the sequence needed to settle them.

That is where ambiguity becomes important.

It is not only that several meanings are possible. The uncertainty exposes the difference between seeing a configuration and knowing the action to which it belonged.

I can say that a person stood there, that his arm was raised, that his hand was close to the pole. The moment I say that he had just installed the sign, I have moved beyond what is immediately visible.

The photograph gives me reasons to imagine a process. It does not necessarily give me the process itself.

For some time I treated this primarily as a problem of photography: the world continues, while the photograph fixes only a bounded interval.

Then another question began to trouble that distinction.

Why was I treating the photographed state as something stable in the first place?

Norbert Elias called this tendency process-reduction: the habit of conceptually reducing ongoing processes to static states, as though change were something later added to otherwise stable things.

Once I began to think in those terms, ordinary things looked slightly different.

A street can appear unchanged for years while it is crossed, worn, cleaned, marked, repaired and regulated. A station may appear solid and permanent while its continued availability depends on repeated activity. A person can look almost the same from one day to the next while ageing without interruption.

What appears stable need not stand outside process.

Its stability may itself be produced through time.

This does not mean that everything should simply be called process. At that point the word would explain very little. Nor does change automatically mean improvement. Things deteriorate. Systems fail. Continuity may require alteration in one situation and resistance to alteration in another.

The point I find useful is narrower.

A state that looks settled may still be the temporary result of ongoing relations and repeated activity.

This changed the photographic question for me.

Perhaps a still photograph does not confront a world made up of fixed things that occasionally begin to move. It encounters configurations that are already situated within time, even when the change surrounding them is too slow, too familiar or too dispersed to become immediately visible.

A road does not begin to belong to a process only when workers open its surface.

A human body does not become temporal only when it moves quickly enough to blur.

The photograph has not created the process by interrupting it. It has encountered the process somewhere in its course.

I had come close to this while working on City in Return. Roads, stations and other infrastructures often seemed most visibly unsettled at the moments when construction, maintenance or temporary redirection interrupted their ordinary appearance. These situations made continuation perceptible, but they did not contain it. What became visible was one configuration within something that had begun earlier and would continue afterwards.

A repaired surface can make a longer temporal relation imaginable without displaying the entire history of its use.

A worker can make labour present without making every preceding and following action visible.

A construction site can be unmistakably unfinished while leaving its eventual form unknown.

Process keeps exceeding the evidence through which I recognise it.

The photograph is not the process in miniature.

It is a bounded encounter with one of its configurations.

With longer looking, some configurations begin to feel less self-contained. A road has users. A barrier redirects bodies. A sign belongs to an order that existed before the exposure and may continue after it. None of this means that every relation I can imagine is equally supported by the image.

A relation I can imagine is not necessarily one I can demonstrate.

The viewer's experience is productive, but it is not an unlimited licence.

Knowing how traffic signs are usually handled does not allow me to decide what this worker was doing. Knowing that stations involve arrival and departure does not tell me whether a particular person has just arrived or is waiting to leave.

The image invites temporal completion and resists it at the same time.

Perhaps its fragmentary nature becomes most interesting when there is enough visible structure for a before and after to become plausible without either becoming certain.

I return to the worker and the sign.

His head is still lowered. His arm remains raised. The pole is still there. Whatever action surrounded that fraction of time has long since continued beyond the photograph.

I still cannot say with certainty whether I photographed the end of one action, the beginning of another, or simply a gesture that becomes more suggestive because photography detached it from what came before and after.

I no longer think of that only as missing information.

Life rarely presents itself to us as a completed process.

We usually enter somewhere in the middle.

We meet people whose histories began before us. We use systems already operating and act without seeing every consequence of what we do. Even our own lives are experienced from within while they are still unfolding.

Much of what we understand as process is therefore understood from partial positions inside it.

Photography makes that condition unusually visible because it gives the fragment a physical limit.

The frame ends.

The exposure ends.

The process may not.

What remains inside can contain duration, gesture, trace or an arrangement that points beyond itself. It can meet previous experience in the viewer and become part of a possible before and after. Sometimes one continuation seems likely. Sometimes several remain open.

None of this restores the missing time.

But the photograph can keep its absence active.

The question I am left with is narrower than the one with which I began.

When I recognise a process in a photograph, how much of that process was actually visible?

And how much began to move only when the fragment met everything I already knew about a world that had never stopped?

## References

Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World*, Vol. 1, trans. Richard M. Zaner and H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

Norbert Elias, *What Is Sociology?*, trans. Stephen Mennell and Grace Morrissey (London: Hutchinson; New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), especially pp. 111–112.