

The value of uncertainty: The photographic error as embodied knowledge

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Introduction

These days we rarely encounter photographs that have gone wrong: images that are blurred, out of focus, over or under exposed or displaying some other faults or quirks. But the rare occurrence of errors is having a detrimental impact on our relationship with photography and how we interpret photographic truth and meaning. Errors were a more common and visible aspect of photography when it was a predominantly film and chemical medium but, with the advent of digital photography, the parameters of casual error-creation have changed. Technological efficiencies such as camera automation, image preview and instant deletion have all but eradicated the error from everyday photographic practice and perception.

A consequence of removing errors from the prevailing image culture is that accuracy and resemblance become the predominant signifiers in the photographs we see on a daily basis. Accurate photographs seem to depict things ‘as they are’, and to provide a transparent gateway to real events. Digital cameras and networked distribution compress the journey from event to image to such an extent that we rarely appreciate the contingent and situated act of photography which took place in order to bring the image into being.

Digital photography has returned us to an era when the truth claims for photography could be at their highest. The notion of ‘truth’ is used here in the sense of ‘neutrality’: the apparent seamless route from reality through the lens to the screen without any seeming interference by a contextualised and embodied human presence. The burden of impartiality and objectivity which has plagued photography since its invention is felt today in the quantity of anonymous and apparently ‘authorless’ images which appear on the internet.

Without a concept of photography as an embodied activity involving human decision making and an awareness of the limitations of technology, the resulting image becomes the sole locus of attention for the truth claims about what it depicts. Photographic errors are important because they present us with evidence of the contingency of the photograph, breaking the spell of neutrality and reasserting the human-technical relationship in the creation of the image.

This paper draws on my practice-based research project *In Pursuit of Error* which is an ethnographic study of the error in photographic practice. I will argue that the error presents an alternative photographic epistemology from that found in contemporary visual culture: a form of embodied knowledge that challenges a neutral and machine-led concept of photography in which veracity is the central signifier, proposing instead a concept of photography that acknowledges the materiality of the photographic ‘act-in-context’.

The contributions to *In Pursuit of Error* cover a broad range of subjects and a wide gamut of errors from the smallest maladjustment to the wildest abstraction. I ask contributors to tell me how the photograph occurred: whether accidentally, or as a result of some deliberate action on their part. This distinguishes images that have been created through mismanagement or malfunction of the technology, thereby producing an unexpected image, and those where the technology has been manipulated to produce an unpredictable outcome. For the purposes of this discussion I will refer to both as 'errors' because both types of image share a lack of authorial control, despite the difference in their means of production. It is the lack of control which attends to both accidents and actions that is a key aspect of the following discussion.

While the distinction between accidental and deliberate errors is not necessarily noticeable in the resulting image, the distinction does provide a useful point from which to investigate the photographic error in more detail and to explore the interplay between photographer and camera that takes place in the act of photographing.

Accidental errors – machine vision reveals the photographic event

The increasing automation of photography takes much of the decision making out of the hands of the photographer, programming out the fallibilities of the amateur in order to produce 'better' pictures. This automation produces images which are largely the product of the machine, or more exactly in the case of the digital camera, the computation.

However, while these settings are fixed, the situation in front of the camera is subject to change and it is this misalignment between programme and context that produces the accidental error: an image that records how the camera has 'seen' through its programme at a given point in time.

The images that result from this form of technological disruption can be a liberating reminder of an aspect of photography which is often absent from discussions both aesthetic and technological – that taking a photograph is a process. To see the relationship between the thing photographed and the resulting image in a strictly causal relation, as a form of transmittal, is to overlook the photographic *event*, a time based action during which an image is recorded. In the photographic event the variables of situation, time, light, camera and human actions all coalesce to create the image. Unexpected variations in any of these components can contribute to the creation of an error.

The difference between what the camera sees and what the photographer sees is at the heart of how the accidental error occurs. The accidental error presents us with a vision of computational or technological seeing, a vision which can nonetheless still be recognised as 'photography'.

The accidental error makes us aware of the intercession of the technology in the creation of the image by making it visible, although this is an aspect of all photography. In so doing, it proposes the camera as possessing its own subjectivity, within the limits of its design and operation. Camera-seeing involves a translation from event to image, with the camera inserting its own perspective onto the image produced. To become aware of the

subjectivity of the camera exposes the notion of 'objective photography' as a fallacy and offers a radically different way of conceiving the camera as a linked subjective presence in the creation of the image.

Deliberate errors – performing subversive photography

The camera is an integral part of the photographic process, and as such a tool that can be manipulated in order to perform outside of its programmed parameters by a knowing collaborator. Deliberate errors can be 'conjured' through a variety of means such as moving the camera during exposure, leaving the shutter open, or playing with the focus controls.

The deliberate error uses the camera against itself, disrupting the settings in order to produce an aberrant image. While there are certain actions which can be predicted it is also the case that knowledge of a proposed outcome can only be partial. I might know that reducing the shutter speed will produce blur, but I cannot predict what the resulting image will look like based on that intervention alone. The situation being photographed as well as light and time, will all contribute additional, unforeseen elements to the resulting photograph. The distinction between the accidental and the deliberate error therefore lies in the photographer's knowledge or lack of knowledge of their actions which brought the error into being.

The question that arises is why photographers would deliberately choose to create errors in the first place. It's likely that the technological development of the camera creates opportunities for play which before may not have existed. Automation liberates the photographer from the work of making pictures and instead prompts opportunities to explore the limits and extent of practice itself.

For many of the contributors to *In Pursuit of Error* the desire to manipulate and play is at the heart of their practice, resulting in experiments with light, movement and multiple exposure which form abstract works with painterly connotations. These painterly images contradict the assumption about photographic representation, disrupting the visual indexicality of the photograph and replacing it with a performative indexicality. The deliberate errors of those who explore these methods are explorations of photography as process: 'doing' photography rather than 'taking' photographs.

The deliberate error reminds us of the presence of the photographer in the same way that the accident reminds us of the camera's vision. In each case the contexts and actions which bring the photographic image into being are made visible. The error removes from the resulting photograph the potential for timelessness and instead grounds it in the specific context of the event of **photographing** – the moment in which the error was created.

Accidental and deliberate errors therefore expose some key elements of the interplay between photographer and camera which are pertinent: **performativity, embodiment and subjectivity.**

The photographic universe - transparency and truth

In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (2000) Vilem Flusser frames the relationship between photographer and camera as a form of push and pull between the intentions of each. The camera's 'intentions' lie within the framework of the Program, which for Flusser is not simply the encoding of automaticity which lie in the functions of the camera, but a meta structure which reflects the way that the camera's programme contributes to the creation of an image universe in which a version of society is reflected.

The notion that society constructs and understands itself through photographs is highly relevant to our digital-internet image culture and in this context the absence of the error from this image-world is consequential.

Photography is unique amongst the creative arts in its fundamental association with technology. Technology has the capacity to simplify and to organise human actions toward more refined and linear patterns of behaviour. Judy Wajcman (2004) argues that technology is symbolically linked with notions of mastery and control and in digital photography this is played out in the continual innovation and development of camera technologies designed to remove the subjective unreliability of the human element.

The removal of 'messy' or uncontrolled elements, which includes humans, from the photographic process, can be seen as a drive to control and master the process of image making. The routine processes of digital technologies incorporate error-checking and error correction as standard elements of the algorithm, making the alleviation of error an implicit feature of the digital. However as Paul Virilio points out "accidents are programmed into every technology" (Matthewman 2013: 283), and to believe that we are capable of removing them is misguided. Just because we don't encounter errors doesn't mean they do not exist – as contributions to my project would attest. Rather it is a photography culture that prizes automation and faithful reproduction that creates an environment in which errors appear aberrant and counter to the rules and conventions of digital photography.

The experimental photographer, operating on the periphery of these cultural expectations is in a sense left free to play with, and against, the technology exposing another way of photographing that evades the authoritarian, rule based rigidity of orthodox practice. The error becomes not just a failure to get something right but a wilful desire to subvert the status quo, to upset the hegemony of photography culture which controls and limits how practice operates.

Embodied knowledge – collaboration and losing control

To 'deliberately' create a photographic error is to make a representation of an error that could occur inadvertently or accidentally. To seek it out and create it, rather than rely on it occurring by chance, challenges the norms of photographic representation. This is where the embodied photographer comes to the fore, as her agency brings into being images which subvert the expected operation of the Program.

This type of negotiation with the parameters of a technology is what Sherry Turkle defines as 'soft mastery' (Turkle and Papert 1990). 'Soft mastery'; the capacity to bend the rules, to negotiate and relate, can be seen in how photographers approach the creation of deliberate errors. Contributors to IPE talk about "pushing and pulling photographic equipment", "playing with the camera" and how the "chance element is both fun and important" which evidence their desire to engage with the technology of photography in an experimental and open-ended way. They explore the camera as a tool that can offer its own contribution to the creative process: by extending and subverting its programmed functions they prompt the camera to new feats of vision. They use their embodied knowledge of the camera to place decisions and actions in the path of the photographic event in order to explore the limits and extents of their practice

Thus an embodied knowledge is relational and negotiates with technology in order to produce unexpected results. 'Soft mastery' can be related to Claude Levi Strauss's concept of the bricoleur, who engages with scientific enquiry from a position of cooperation. The bricoleur notion of 'tinkering' echoes Flusser's comment about the photographer's capability to "outwit the camera's rigidity" (Flusser 2000: 80) which is evidenced by photographers' pursuit of the deliberate error.

One might also argue that the rigidity being outwitted by these experiments is not just the camera's, which we have already established is prey to the contradictions of its own vision, but the rigidity of photographic culture which insists on rules of practice and production.

What type of knowledge do errors produce?

Because the error occurs spontaneously it cannot be predicted or fully scripted. The error is emergent – it occurs at the moment of its making and is neither predicated on a set of criteria nor reducible to those criteria. Identifying this quality of emergence finally closes the distinction between the accidental and deliberate error, for they are both the products of an unknowable moment in the photographic event.

The spontaneity of the error means that interrogation of it can only happen after the event of its creation. Error images therefore present us with moments of uncertainty in relation both to our actions in photographing and in the objects that we consider 'photographs'.

Creative activity often relies on entering into a state of uncertainty or doubt in order to progress. As Donald Barthelme states: "Without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention" (Barthelme 1997: 12).

The error image proposes that the seamless transmission between photographed subject and resulting image is not guaranteed, and that aspects of photography which we have come to assume are inherent to the medium – simplicity, accuracy, veracity - are in fact products of a technological development which is driven by the goal to remove the playful, embodied knowledge of the photographer from the event of photographing. Chance and contingency are part of the bricoleur's strategy and the way in which the established order is subverted, and new knowledge is created. Errors are therefore points of departure towards new ways of thinking about our photographic image culture.

Both actions and accidents point to a material agency at work in the actions of humans and cameras in the process of doing photography. Barbara Bolt's materialist ontology suggests that attention to the performative experiences of photographing moves us beyond the mimetic and representational and toward a concept of photography as a "expansive force that creates something unimaginable yet precisely 'true-to-life'" (Bolt 2013: 126).

In common with Hito Steyerl, I see the error as providing a means to disrupt the seamless uniformity of photography practice in relation to accepted standards of photographic 'truth' (Steyerl 2010). Errors are 'productive' in that they offer a means to interrogate notions of perfection and dichotomies of right and wrong that adhere to our social attitudes and cultural productions. The messy, unexpected, chaotic nature of the error reminds us that the certainty and authority we invest in our digital tools and infrastructure can be easily thrown into question when we encounter the unpredictable.

The error undermines the certainty of the photographic record and exposes the photographic event and the multiple contingencies that constitute photographing as a time-based action. Only when this action is interrupted or thwarted in some way can we really see it – and only then can we become aware of the complexity that our consumption of everyday digital photography obscures. The error breaks the habitual order of things and the truth about photography's partiality, situatedness and subjectivity is revealed in these moments of misrecognition. The interdependence of error and truth is such that it is only through making, seeing and living with our errors that we can understand what is at stake if we were to be without them. Our errors are part of the truth of photography itself.

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