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The Permanent Now:
Rephotography and the Human Experience

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“I realized I had been living in the illusion of a permanent now.”
—Douglas Levere

This essay examines how people document and learn about the passage of time through photography, particularly with “rephotography,” the act of revisiting and reshooting a place, person or scene after years or decades have past.¹ Documenting the passage of time denotes change, and by examining multiple rephotography projects, viewers and artists readily find that landscapes, people and cityscapes experience change at different rates. In examining three books² that chronicle rephotography projects, Mark Klett, et. al’s Third Views, Second Sights, Douglas Levere’s New York Changing, and Milton Rogovin’s Triptychs, we can see the passage of time affect our surroundings variously, whether cityscape, landscape or within human context. What also strikes me about two of the projects is that quite by coincidence, I chose photographers who were more keenly interested in their subject matter than in potential accolades as artists. As Klett wryly declares, photography is “a genre where heroic exploits by individuals are legendary”³; quite contrary to this, the Third Views team enjoyed collaborating and making use of each individual’s strengths, to create a product greater than the sum of those individual parts.

In their book, Second View: The Rephotographic Survey Project, Mark Klett and his fellow photographers follow in the footsteps of nineteenth-century photographers William Henry Jackson, Timothy O’Sullivan and others who conducted government-sponsored surveys of the American West. The original photographs were used “for various purposes, from

¹ Rosenblum, 530

² It is important to note that I chose finished sequences as represented in published books to reflect the fact that the act of choosing the shots and how they are presented is up to the artists, not up to me. I am therefore analyzing the intellectual work that has already been done, rather than endeavoring to impose my own structure and point of view by creating sequences of my choosing. The idea that deliberate sequencing is important comes from the work of Minor White. A sequence is “grounded the individual photograph within a context” and “increased the precision with which the series as a whole expressed [White’s] intended meaning.” (Pultz 29)

³ Klett 8

scientific documentation to political lobbying”⁴ and served to document new territories. The second series took “a fresh look at historic places by making a new view from the old” by studying how the original photographs had been made, and by comparing their contemporary perspectives to that of the original works⁵. Twenty years later, curiosity got the best of Klett, and he put together another team to repeat many of the photographs, then collected and published with their predecessors as Third Views, Second Sights: a Rephotographic Survey of the American West. This third project, Klett writes, is “the product of new minds working to re-experience known landscapes in new ways, with emphasis on how people and places have interacted”⁶.

In his book, New York Changing: Revisiting Berenice Abbott’s New York, photographer Douglas Levere follows Abbott’s footsteps around the city and captures the change that occurred between Abbott’s 1930s and Levere’s late 1990s and early 2000s. Abbott returned to New York from Paris in 1935 and was so struck by the dramatic changes that had swept through the city in her absence of a few years that she became determined to document the city. Her goal had been to “capture New York’s ‘extraordinary potentialities, its size, its youth...its state of flux...approached with love void of sentimentality, and not solely with criticism and irony’”⁷. Levere re-executes many of these photos as faithfully as possible, even using a camera that was to belong to Abbott⁸.

In only one book that I examined for this paper did an artist create and re-create his own views: social documentary photographer Milton Rogovin photographed those he called “The Forgotten Ones” residing in Buffalo’s Lower West Side. This socioeconomically-challengened neighborhood was rife with drug dealers and prostitutes; historically-speaking,

⁴ Klett 2

⁵ Klett 1

⁶ Klett 2

⁷ Levere 15

⁸ Ibid., 13

the residents of the Lower West Side would never have been deemed “important” enough—nor would they have had the funds—to be depicted in portraiture before the advent of photography⁹. Over the course of more than thirty years, Rogovin photographs the same subjects and their families in their urban settings, documenting their homes and yards and streets, no matter their condition. Rogovin does this with immense respect and little pretense; he simply told his subjects to look at the camera, never providing instruction on how to pose or whether to smile. The resulting portraits convey a simple humanity containing no criticism nor commentary on the surroundings, occupations or pastimes of the subjects. Subjects appear increasingly relaxed and natural in the later photographs, which is reflective of the respect and esteem with which the community came to regard Rogovin and his wife, Anne.

Trends emerge in the examination of these carefully-sequenced and constructed collections of photographs. As expected, time affects people more rapidly, over shorter intervals. The physiography of the land changes most slowly, as do natural phenomena such as hot springs, geysers and bodies of water, unless interfered with by human engineering. In the middle lies plant life, particularly trees. Fast-moving, smaller vegetation or plants in window boxes come and go quickly; trees are the only plant life that seem to exist across some of the sequences in Third Views and New York Changing.

The Humanscape

It’s interesting to note in Third Views that the most dramatic changes observed in the scenes are the marks that humankind have left on the Western landscape. This was an intentional effect of the sequences, a deliberate departure from traditional landscape photography, whether it documented natural beauty or its destruction:¹⁰

⁹ Rosenblum 39

¹⁰ Klett 6-7

“The Third View group was interested in reexamining the western landscape in a way that didn’t condemn human connections to the land. Instead, the project wanted to accept human existence as a part of nature and to confirm the complexity of that relationship.”¹¹

As such, roads appear and disappear in the Third View team’s photos. Communities flourish and die, and water rises or recedes as people have dammed and released it. This is consistent with what we see in Rogovin’s work—that change over time for people is rapid. Perhaps it is because our lives are so fleetingly short that we are compelled to make an impact on our surroundings, or that our effect on the landscape is equally rapid.

The seventy-odd intervening years between Abbott and Levere’s photos leave their mark as well. The people in these photos rarely take center stage; figures are merely artifacts of urban life. The photos seek only to chronicle sheer human creation and destruction. Sometimes the changes are drastic, as in the repeated views of “MacDougal Alley” or “South Street and James Slip” (figs 1-4); sometimes changes are very subtle, as in the photo by Abbott that first caught Levere’s eye. During an auction preview, Levere spied a view of Broome Street, on which he lived at the time. He subsequently became fascinated with Abbot’s work and the idea of repeating it. Levere’s shot of the same street scene is remarkably unchanged. The things most visibly changed are those that are most fleeting: storefronts, automobiles and street lamps. There is only a single architectural difference, aside from cosmetic changes like the tone or cleanliness of bricks and columns: The building housing the vegetarian restaurant in the lower-right of the photo has been razed, and an apparently Asian-owned hardware store stands on the premises of the “Progressive Bronze Corp.”¹² These subtle changes belie the complexity of human activity. “Every change in our built environment reflects countless decisions. The future of our city depends, in great part, on understanding how past decisions have played out.” Says Levere, “A single photo gives the

¹¹ Ibid., 8

¹² Levere 90, 91

illusion that time stops. A rephoto lifts that illusion. In this tangling of the old and the new, the different and the same, lies the truth that Abbott understood so well. All is flux; change is the only permanence.”¹³

The passage of time is documented most poignantly in Rogovin’s work. The recording of the arrival and passing of generations is a meme common to every human being and with which each of us can identify. Rogovin and his wife were repeatedly welcomed by residents into their neighborhood despite the fact that the Rogovins’ socioeconomic status as white professionals places them as potential oppressors. The story of how the Rogovins were accepted and were able to reciprocate deep respect is moving. As previously mentioned, the few people depicted in Third Views or New York Changing are mostly provided for context; they are documented as a cross-section of time rather than longitudinally. Because Rogovin took a more sociological approach by documenting the same individuals rather than (sometimes in spite of) their surroundings, the viewer can readily see that time passes more quickly for the subjects of Buffalo’s Lower West Side. Rogovin sometimes returned to the neighborhood to find subjects in jail or deceased. The absence of subjects in subsequent shots is as powerful as their presence. As evolutionary biologist Steven Jay Gould wrote in the introduction to Rogovin’s Triptychs, “I still cannot view [two of the triptychs] without tears welling into my eyes, for they show the strength of life, the dignity of death and the power of renewal.” In these two sequences [fig 5], “no new people are added, but one generation advances to extreme old age as another mounts to adulthood. The protector of time one becomes the protected of time three, as grandparental love wins the devotion that comes from within. Rogovin has shown us strength that is truly beyond words”¹⁴. Rogovin returned again to the Lower West Side and turned one of these moving series into a Quartet

¹³ Ibid., 14.

¹⁴ Rogovin 13

in which 1974's baby has become an adult, shown alone after losing both grandparents. [Fig 6].

The Naturescape

Changes in natural elements are most readily observed in Third Views. Monumental rock formations such as Wyoming's Castle Rock and the Gateway to the Garden of the Gods remain largely unchanged, while human elements in the former series and vegetation in the latter ebb and flow with the passage of years [figs. 7-9 and 10-12]. One would expect to see evidence of human activity mainly in the form of urban sprawl or other development, but perhaps the most striking human activity recorded is of the Comstock Mines near Virginia City, Nevada. When Timothy O'Sullivan surveyed the spot in 1868, the landscape was dotted with individual mineshafts, ore processing equipment and the buildings that presumably comprised those of businesses or housing for miners [fig. 13]. By 1977, not only are the buildings and shafts gone but a huge portion of the hills have been torn away for strip-mining operations [fig. 14]. The two shots have little in common other than the crest of the uppermost hills and a single road. In Klett's third view of the scene, the elements have begun returning the abandoned area to its natural state: the chiseled lines of the mining process have eroded away, the vegetation is overgrown, and most of the evidence of human habitation are no longer visible from this particular vantage point [fig. 15].

Rogovin and Abbott/Levere worked in an urban environment; as such, natural landscapes and even vegetation are few and far between. As is typical of negative space in modern art, however, the observer can draw conclusions from the absence of natural elements in Abbott's work, in which plant life was typically sparse. Bonnie Yochelson does not make this observation in the book's introduction, but we can draw our own conclusions that trees and green spaces became more important in the latter part of the twentieth century, as the environmental effects of industrialism asserted themselves, and those responsible for urban planning responded accordingly. In two of the rephotographed scenes,

“Hell Gate Bridge I from Astoria [Park], Queens” and “George Washington Bridge II,” the wooded environments have grown considerably in the intervening years.

Conclusion

Klett notes that Third Views helps us to divine the real meaning of landscape photography, that concerning “our essential connection to place, to each other, and most important[ly], to time.”¹⁵ Two of the three books examined here contain much accompanying material that gives dimension and life—history—to the projects. The additional context of Milton Rogovin’s other work demonstrates that the immense respect with which he photographed the Forgotten Ones of the Lower West Side permeates his portraiture, be it of the global family of miners or the people of Appalachia, Chile or Mexico.¹⁶ Klett and his team captured video and audio of sites, interviewed locals, kept detailed field notes, collected artifacts and created QuickTime Virtual Reality Panoramas. “The reason for collecting so many materials,” Klett writes, “was to increase the probability that something interesting would be discovered from casting a wide net”¹⁷ (p5). It will be fascinating to see what future historians and artists do with the materials collected for this project, many of which are included on a DVD that accompanies the book.

My favorite pair is that of Union Square, shot by Abbott in 1936 and Levere in 2002 [figs. 16 & 17]. The presence of the statue of Lafayette centers the viewer in an otherwise completely-transformed small park and street scene. The large tree in the center of Levere’s photograph could be in any hometown park, as could the Toys “R” Us department store across the street. Looking then at Abbott’s photograph, with the unfamiliar S. Klein department store and the newly-planted sapling feels like stepping into a time machine. We know without seeing them that the occupants of the curvy, small-windowed cars are wearing

¹⁵ Klett 1

¹⁶ Herzog, Rogovin, “Milton Rogovin, Social Documentary Photographer”

¹⁷ Klett 5

greatcoats and fedoras, or nylons and solidly-heeled shoes, rather than jeans and sneakers. I would love to see this scene again in sixty years; would the sapling on the right of Levere's photo be as large as the tree in the center? Will the tree in the center survive? The Corinthian capitals of what used to be the Union Savings bank will surely still stand, but what will become of Toys "R" Us? It is by pairing two photos such as these that we can see that change is the constant, that photos trap only a moment as the blink of an eye, and that when we blink again, the scene is subtly or dramatically changed. A single shot of the things and people around us reflects a moment in the "permanent now." It is only by stringing these permanent moments together in sequences—no matter how long the interval between them—that we begin to learn about the passage of time outside our own limited scope and about our evolving and lasting effect we have on each other, on that which we create and on our natural surroundings.

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