Re-contextualizing Images – The Role of Memory and Perception in Attaching Meaning to Photographs

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April 2016

Word Count 8,803 (Including Quotations)

Dissertation submitted for the degree of
Master of Fine Art (Photography)
University of Ulster

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Introduction

Photographic images are encountered every day within our society and, from the moment that we can see, we are using images to make sense of the world. We are surrounded by images in our present, our memories are formed by images of our past and we pre-visualize our future by imagining how things will look. In this dissertation, I will investigate how and why we attach meaning to an image, or specific details within that image, by considering the process that we go through when we interpret the information provided by photographs and other visual art.

Certain images can leave a lasting impression on us and a strong photograph can capture our attention and command a place in our memory. I will question what makes the image of a single, strong photograph remain with us, examining how we process the information offered and how we then construct meaning from photographs.

We are shaped by our histories as memories affect our perception of the past and can distort our view of the present and, in this dissertation, I will argue that we, as author and / or viewer, re-contextualize photographs in our minds so that they fit within a narrative that we want to visualize. Furthermore, our own experiences reflect how we read and also make images and I will question whether we can be sure that what we see, both literally and in our mind's eye, is really what is happening in the image and I will discuss the role of memory in attaching meaning to photographs.

Our perceptions are based on our personal experiences but I will also explore how culture, history and education contribute to how we understand visual art, whilst also considering how images are re-contextualized internally by the viewer.

I will begin the dissertation by evaluating how we perceive meanings within photographs. Roland Barthes wrote that all photographs serve as a *"certificate of*

presence" (Barthes, 1981). Therefore, one may assume that a human relates a photograph to a real event and, consequently, must form an association with an image based on something from their own experience and memory. Life experiences affect how we perceive past events and there is a circular exchange that takes place between our memories of the past and our understanding of the present. Therefore, we may question: if our present is influenced by our past and our past is affected by later life experiences, how can we rely on our memories as accurate accounts of what really happened? Furthermore, how does this affect our perception when reading visual art? Additionally, I will consider how the photographer as author can effectively communicate his or her story to the viewer who has encountered or suffered different experiences.

I will explore whether the reality of a sane person is significantly different to that of a person who is mentally unwell and I will posit that some hallucinations are not so far removed from reality that they should be deemed unquestionably false. Finally, I will question whether it is possible to successfully depict, via photography, something that exists in one's mind in such a way that other people are able to connect with it.

Perceived Meaning in Photographs

A fascinating component in photography is that, although a photograph conveys a message, it plays only a small part in the communication process. It may show that something happened but we cannot fully understand the meaning from the image alone; it merely serves as a starting point from which we can construct meaning.

Annette Kuhn wrote:

> *"In order to show what it is evidence of, a photograph must always point you away from itself."* (Kuhn, 2006)

Let us consider Kuhn's comment and imagine that we are holding a photograph, and we are intrigued enough to want to know more than just acknowledge its aesthetic appeal. To enable us to interpret meaning we must consider other aspects about the image and do more than simply look at the picture. For example, it would be useful to know its context in time, or some wider discourse surrounding the photograph, and perhaps some information about the author so that we may try to understand why the picture was made. Naturally, we cannot know exactly why the photographer made a particular image (accompanying text may help) but we can assume that something captured his or her attention and prompted the action of making a photograph.

Therefore, when a photographer makes a photograph s/he identifies with something within the frame and thus attaches a meaning to the resulting image, but this meaning may not readily translate to the viewer because the person reading the image must also contribute something. Stuart Hall considers the viewer's participation in the creation of meaning and Liz Wells writes that Hall discusses how images are *"first 'encoded' by the producer, and then 'decoded' by the viewer."* (Wells, 2011). However, the ability for the viewer to grasp the meaning intended by the author relies on a degree of commonality in the culture and experiences of both parties. Naturally, no two people have exactly the same background and Hall proposes that meanings cannot be read as intended because of these differences.

Alan Sekula writes that the meaning of a photograph is subject to its cultural definition (Sekula, 1975). He describes the photograph as an *"incomplete utterance, a message that depends on some external matrix of conditions and presuppositions for its readability."* Of course the viewer is influenced by his or her own cultural perspective, however, photographs may carry many meanings and so we should question how much the author is able to influence the viewer.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect for a photographer is achieving a level of understanding through their images. For the purpose of this dissertation, I am assuming that a photographer wishes to tell a story with photographs and will focus my dissertation on such images. Consequently, a photographer has a message that he or she wants to convey and, therefore, makes a series of decisions prior to releasing the shutter. Alan Sekula comments on authorship and context in his essay, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning' where he examines the discourse around the opposition of 'realism' and 'expressionism' by referring to photographs made by Alfred Stieglitz and Lewis Hine. He attempts to understand the authorial intention and meaning of each image by considering the social and historical contexts of both photographers.

> *"It seems that only by beginning to uncover the social and historical contexts of the two photographers can we begin to acquire an understanding of meaning as related to intention."* (Sekula, 1975)

Sekula reinforces this statement by commenting on the working practice and route to publication for both Hine and Stieglitz and includes text from Stieglitz called 'How The Steerage Happened' (see appendix 1).

Naturally, the text along with the photograph can help to influence the viewer's reading of an image. However, Sekula interprets the text for 'The Steerage' as *"pure symbolist autobiography".* He describes Stieglitz's unfailing faith in the metaphorical power of the image and how the intense feelings of Stieglitz as author transform the image from a picture of a real event to abstraction. Furthermore, the meaning that Stieglitz attaches to the image may prove problematic for the viewer with a different background and Sekula quotes Clive Bell:

> *"Only if the reader has been informed that 'this is symbolist art' or 'this photograph is a metaphor' can he invest the photograph with a meaning appropriate to Stieglitz's expectations."* (Sekula, 1975)

Alfred Stieglitz, ‘The Steerage’, 1907.

Transforming the personal experience of one’s mind into something that is visually accessible to others may prove burdensome and, thus, the intentions of the photographer may not always dictate how the meaning of the photograph is

deciphered. Therefore, we must consider how the viewer interacts with the image and reconstructs it so that it fits into place within the world that they know.

The Beholder's Share (Psychological Context)

John Berger wrote, *"We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves"* (Berger, 1972). Therefore, when we read visual art we are relating what we see with our own personal experience and by doing so we are re-contextualizing work that the author has made so that it fits within our own personal narrative. Put simply, we see what we want to see based on what we know and how we expect the world to be.

Art historian, Alois Riegl, explored the psychology of perception and is credited with encouraging a dialogue between art history and psychology. Eric Kandel writes about how Riegl "*discovered a new psychological aspect of art"* and along with two *"younger disciples",* Ernst Kris and Ernst Gombrich, he considered the viewer to be a fundamental aspect in a work of art:

> *"… these three focused on the beholder's response to a work of art and thereby laid a foundation for the emergence of a holistic, cognitive psychology of art that was substantially deeper and more rigorous than the dialogue Freud had attempted."* (Kandel, 2012 p.186)

Riegl also wrote, *"Art is incomplete without the perceptual and emotional involvement of the viewer"* and coined the term, 'the beholder's involvement'.[1]

Therefore, a work of visual art is a collaboration between the viewer and the artist, as the viewer interprets the scene and imparts his or her personal experience to add meaning to a picture and, by doing so, he or she effectively transforms a two-dimensional picture, an illusion of the visual world, into a three-

[1] Later referred to as 'the beholder's share' by Gombrich.

dimensional depiction of how he or she sees the world.

Kandel writes about how Ernst Kris and Ernst Gombrich added to the conversation around art criticism and 'the beholder's involvement' by considering the link between emotional response and visual perception. Rudolf Arnheim, a Gestalt psychologist, also wrote about this major change many years later:

> *"With the turn towards psychology, the theory of art began to take cognizance of the difference between the physical world and its appearance, and, subsequently, of the further difference between what is seen in nature and what is recorded in an artistic medium… What is seen depends on who is looking and who taught him to look."* (Arnheim, 1962)

Therefore, we re-contextualize the work of art by bringing something of ourselves to it. However, this theory assumes that we can relate a personal experience to something within the image and raises the question: how can we attach meaning to an image with which we have no relation and a subject matter of which we have no experience or is perhaps more ambiguous?

Art Historian, Ernst Kris, became interested in psychology, trained as a psychoanalyst and worked closely with Sigmund Freud. Freud persuaded Kris to combine his knowledge of art history and psychology to study the perceptual processes of both the artist and viewer.

According to Kandel:

> *"Kris argued that when an artist produces a powerful image out of his of her life experiences and conflicts, that image is inherently ambiguous. The ambiguity in the image elicits both a conscious and unconscious process of recognition in the viewer, who responds emotionally and empathically to the image in terms of his or her own struggles. Thus, just as the artist*

> *creates a work or art, so the viewer re-creates it by responding to its inherent ambiguity. The extent of the beholder's contribution depends on the degree of ambiguity in the work of art."* (Kandel, 2012 pp.191-192)

Interestingly, Kris is arguing that by creating work that is ambiguous, the artist is able to elicit a response from the viewer who has a different set of experiences and prompt them to tap into their own feelings and emotions to attach meaning to the work. Art historian, Wilhelm Worringer, discusses ambiguity in visual art and Kandel draws attention to his essay entitled, 'Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style':

> *"Worringer argues that two sensitivities are required of the viewer: empathy, which allows the viewer to lose himself or herself in a painting and be at one with the subject, and abstraction, which allows the viewer to retreat from the complexities of the everyday world and follow the symbolic language of the forms and colors in a painting."*
> (Kandel, 2012 p.192).

Therefore, one may assume that the viewer does not need to know about the subject matter and draws upon subconscious thought processes to attach meaning to an image. Furthermore, this may be a different meaning to that intended by the author.

In his television series, 'Ways of Seeing', John Berger refers to how children relate all images directly to their own experiences and interpret them accordingly. He spoke with a group of children about a Caravaggio painting, 'Supper at Emmaus' and asked them to interpret what they saw.

Berger comments:

> *"Because they were really looking and really relating what they saw to*

their own experience, they recognized something that most adults wouldn't... Without knowing the artist's name, let alone anything about Caravaggio's life, or the fact that he was homosexual, they immediately saw how sexually ambivalent the principal figure was." (Berger, 1972)

Caravaggio, 'Supper at Emmaus', 1601.

Berger suggests that the children knew nothing about Caravaggio and had no other knowledge about the context in which the painting was made that would influence their interpretation of the scene. Thus, they could not contextualize the picture with anything other than their own experiences and some of them were able to relate to the scene. Interestingly, one of the children thought that the character at the centre of the scene might be Jesus. One may speculate as to exactly why the child thought it was Jesus. He mentioned that the character looked like a leader and it is possible that he had seen paintings of Christ before, however, the depiction in this painting shows Jesus without a beard and that is unusual. Therefore, there was something that made him associate aspects within

the picture with his own understanding of the scene however, not all of the children shared his opinion. Another child thought that the figure was not Jesus because there was no bread or wine on the table. Therefore, the image did not fit with his experience of seeing pictures of Christ.

Professor, M.D. Vernon (1971) writes that if children are often exposed to images with similar content they are able to recognize specific objects with which they have become familiar. Vernon refers to the Terman-Merrill test of intelligence and states that as a child reaches seven years old, s/he can identify more objects within a picture and can, thus, explain with greater detail the obvious activities within the image. However, if a picture is more ambiguous and suggests something that is not actually depicted, s/he will not be able to attach meaning to it until s/he reaches eleven years old.

Vernon describes how young children attach meaning to images:

> *"… younger children do not always notice those items in a picture which appear to us to be important and central to the incidents depicted. They may ignore them, and yet notice relatively unimportant details. For instance, in a picture used by the author of a fight, beer spilt from a broken bottle on to the floor was one of the items most frequently mentioned by children of nine or ten, though this item was not of any particular importance to the main subject of the picture".* (Vernon, 1971 p.95)

Vernon was commenting on the use of 'visual aids' in schools and she believed that children could be confused by pictures depicting scenes with which they were unfamiliar, for example, images of people living in foreign countries, and that these images may not be effectively understood by children younger than eleven:

> *"The children may be confused by the unfamiliar costumes and settings,*

and have no more than the vaguest notion of what the people are like or what they are doing." (Vernon, 1971 p.96)

However, Vernon wrote this text in 1971 and children today have far greater access to world events than they did in 1971 and, therefore, perhaps a wider exposure to other environments outside of their own.

However, Vernon continued: *"… the children may notice only things which are familiar and comprehensible to them".*[2] This is an interesting point that may be relevant when we interpret meaning in photographs today as we all have different experiences. James E. Cutting (2006) conducted research on a phenomenon called 'mere exposure', which is related to implicit learning. Cutting writes that we are exposed to countless images throughout life but do not remember them. However, a trace of the image remains with us unconsciously and this can affect our aesthetic preferences in the future (see appendix 2).

The Polysemy of Photographs

Roland Barthes argues that photographs are polysemic, conveying multiple meanings, and I will posit that individuals attach different meanings to the same image. However, John A Walker employed a term, 'the ideology of individualism' to describe how a number of his students believed that:

"individuals are unique therefore everyone is different, therefore everyone interprets images differently, therefore one cannot speak about the meaning of an image; there are as many meanings as there are human beings." (Walker, 1997 p.52)

Therefore, one image may have as many as seven billion meanings, one for

[2] Vernon states that the teacher should explain what is happening in the images to the children and encourage them to talk about them so that they can understand the content. (Vernon, 1971 P.96.)

each individual on earth, and thus becomes meaningless. I would argue that an image does indeed carry a multitude of meanings and how the meaning is deciphered, depends upon the type of image, the context in which it is seen and the life experience of the viewer. Naturally, as we have discussed, text may help to make the meaning of an image more accessible but the text will be the viewpoint of the writer and thus biased. Therefore, we should also consider the viewer's reaction to photographs that provide little or no context.

Deadpan Photography

We may consider the emotional detachment of the 'deadpan' aesthetic as an example of the artist stripping away sentimental and subjective elements from the scene, thus forcing the viewer to delve deep into his or her own psyche in order to attribute some meaning to the image for we have no indication of the artist's emotions to guide us.

Thomas Ruff started to make deadpan portraits of his friends in the late 1970s and these images can be likened to passport photographs, although Ruff's prints are substantially bigger. For example, the images that follow are printed around 200cm by 150cm.

Thomas Ruff, 'Portrait (S. Weirauch)', 1988.

Thomas Ruff, 'Portrait (I. Graw)', 1988.

Thomas Ruff, 'Portrait (Stoya)', 1986.

Thomas Ruff, 'Portrait (M. Roeser)', 1999.

There is little context offered in the images, except for the clothing worn by each sitter and the subjects, by remaining expressionless, are stripped of emotion. The subjects look “ordinary” because they are not stunningly beautiful or ugly and the lighting is flat and shadow-less. Thus, the lack of visual triggers leaves the viewer with complete control over how each person is perceived and this mechanical and minimalistic style is perhaps photography in its most pure form. The photographs may be interpreted as portraits of the person looking at them as they tell the viewer more about themselves than the subjects who are posing for the photographs.

Charlotte Cotton writes of Ruff:

> *“He experiments with the way we understand a subject because of our knowledge or expectation of how it is represented pictorially.”* (Cotton, 2009 p.105)

She comments on Ruff's 'Deadpan Portraits':

> *"… the works' blank expressions and lack of visual triggers, such as gesture, confound our expectations of discovering a person's character through their appearance."* (Cotton, 2009 Pp.105-106)

The viewer has no reason to add a personality to the subject, other than drawing from their inner self, and one could refer to what William Kentridge says about his own art when trying to understand Ruff's 'Deadpan Portraits':

> *"It's about the combination between what comes to me from the picture and what I project onto it from my own history, memories, prejudice, readings and rationality".* (Kentridge, 2014)

Furthermore, Eric Kandel draws our attention to the German physician and physicist, Hermann von Helmholtz. Helmholtz studied visual perception but it was his earlier studies involving tactile perception that caused him to propose that the brain unconsciously processed a great amount of sensory information.[3]

> *"He (Helmholtz) argued that information is routed to and processed at different sites in the brain during perception and during voluntary movement. When Helmholtz turned his attention to the study of vision, he realized that any static, two-dimensional image contains poor-quality, incomplete information. To reconstruct the dynamic, three-dimensional world from which the image was formed, the brain needs additional information. In fact, if the brain relied solely on the information it receives from the eyes, vision would be impossible. He therefore concluded that*

[3] "Helmholtz, one of the most important physicists of the 19th century, also made major contributions to many areas of sensory physiology and was the 1st modern, empirical scientist to study visual perception. In his earlier studies of tactile perception, he succeeded in measuring the speed with which electrical signals move along the axon of a nerve cell and found that it is surprisingly slow (about 90 feet per second) and that our reaction time is slower still." (Kandel, 2011 p.202)

> *perception must also be based on a process of guessing and hypotheses testing in the brain, based on past experiences. Such educated guessing allows us to infer on the basis of past experience what an image represents."* (Kandel, 2011 p.203)

Helmholtz referred to this as 'unconscious inference' whereby, based on information from our senses, our brain has to infer what an object might be. Chris Frith, a cognitive psychologist, adds to Helmholtz's insight: *"We do not have direct access to the physical world. It may feel as if we have direct access, but this is an illusion created by our brain."* (Frith, 2007 p.40)

Research from neuroscientist Tom Albright compliments Helmholtz's argument. Albright speaks of contextual clues to visual perception and refers to the 'inverse problem of optics', in which he discusses the unreliability of the brain in terms of context and visual processing. He describes a fundamental problem of vision:

> *"…Images are projected onto to the back surface of the eye and from that image the brain tries to infer the causes of that image… there is not enough information in that image to reliably reconstruct what's out there in the world and yet we do it most of the time… every now and then we fail and call those illusions… The only way that we can get round this 'inverse problem of optics' is by including additional sources of information."*[4]

Albright refers to local context, *"the other stuff that happens to be in the image at the same time".* For example, if we see a picture of a car that is partially obstructed by another object, we can fairly reliably infer where the car extends past that object. Therefore, we can draw conclusions about things in our environment in the absence of direct information based on inferences from other sources of information.

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[4] Taken from The Science Network interview by Roger Bingham with Tom Albright
http://thesciencenetwork.org/programs/the-science-studio/perception-and-the-beholder-s-share

Another source of context is prior experience, where we draw upon what we have learnt and use that information to develop hypotheses about the world. Often we see things and there is not enough information or the image is incomplete and we automatically fill in the blanks based on what is most likely to be happening by referring to our prior experiences with the world. Albright describes this as a *"best guess"* and this is how people may construct visual illusions. This theory can be related to visual art, which provides an impression or spark that may trigger a memory and cause the viewer to project their experiences of the world onto an image and subsequently see an image that is unique to him or her. Therefore, the things that we see are not defined solely by what is on one's retina but also by memory and what we know to be true. However, how do we read photographs that depict a familiar cultural experience but feature specific events in which we were not involved? The family photograph album may be regarded as a record of culture in Western society and one may consider it as ambiguous, especially if the people and specific events featured in the album are unknown to us.

The Familiar

In her essay, 'Speaking the Album' (2002), Martha Langford describes the photographic album as *"a repository for memory",* however, she notes that numerous psychologists and sociologists believe that the memories contained in a photographic album are encoded and *"camouflaged behind social rituals or psychological screens".* She mentions that theorists writing on photography argue that the main function of a photographic album is to create alternative realities and, furthermore, if the photographs within the album are not contextualized by the authors, compilers or even those who are familiar with the people and events featured, the albums are destined to remain un-interpretable. Langford goes on to mention that cultural theorists believe that, "*individual and collective life-stories evolve over time, depending on the storyteller and listener."* Therefore, one cannot rely on the accuracy of such accounts (Langford, 2002).

Langford conducted a study centered on a photographic album that was donated to the McCord Museum in Montreal. The compiler of the album was unknown, thus the album was classed as anonymous. However, the donation of the album was arranged by a museum volunteer who did know the family.

Langford interviewed five women about the images in the album. None of the women knew the people depicted but were familiar with the geographical area. She raised questions about first impressions, contents and how the album was organized before moving on to memory. Langford reports that the answers from each of the women had some commonality with regards to content and tone but differed over specificities with each providing her own narrative.

Each respondent gave different accounts of how they perceived the characters and the constitution of the family in the album, however, all five had memories "in common" with the compiler but recounted different experiences. For example, there were pictures taken at a summer camp and one of the women recalled bad memories of a camping trip as she had been ill for the entire trip and vowed never to do it again, whereas the photographs showed that the anonymous compiler had a different experience as she returned to camp for a second time.

Langford selected the interviewees specifically to tap into their perspectives on family life and to aid her in trying to understand the compiler's circumstances:

> *"I had selected these five women to interview because of their gender, social and educational backgrounds, and, without saying so because of their positions within their families. Two had been their parents' only child; one was an adopted child, with adopted siblings. Two sisters offered another interesting relationship. The elder of the two had lived the life of an only child until adolescence, when her parents suddenly had two more children, a boy and a girl; the youngest informant was that much younger sister."* (Langford, 2002 p.235)

Langford had formed her own opinion about the ‘me’ in the album and wanted to find women that had family experiences similar to those that she perceived the compiler to have. She saw the child to be the only child born to older parents and perceived her to be lonely:

> *“I saw a child alone with her ‘Dicky’ bird, alone with her nursemaid. The fleeting presence of the putative ‘older’ sister meant no more to me than the child’s play acting with a doll’s baby carriage. She wanted for siblings; she did not have them.”* (Langford, 2002 p.235)

Interestingly, the five women being interviewed constructed a family for the lonely child; they *“wove her into a nest of loving relations”* (Langford, 2002), and in doing so created a narrative by projecting their feelings of childhood onto the photographs in the album, although Langford writes that the responses (including her own) were *“guardedly empathetic… none of us were prepared to surrender our own inner child, or the uniqueness of our adolescent experiences.”* All of the women concluded that the album symbolized the coming of age of ‘Me’:

> *“The pictures showed them what they explained to me as a journey from the island of family to the continent of society, with myriad physiological and psychological changes along the way.”* (Langford, 2002 p.240)

However, the volunteer who arranged the donation and knew the family added some context surrounding the album and from this we are able to formulate a different meaning with the images. ‘Me’ was Margery Paterson (1921 – 1998) who had developed tuberculosis and was admitted to a sanitarium where she made a slow recovery. Langford deduces that the photographs show how Margery Paterson was isolated from the community to stop the spread of the disease and thus we are offered a somewhat different conclusion to the narrative constructed by the women interviewed for the study. However, the respondents did notice certain qualities within the tone of the album, for example, the

loneliness that Margery was feeling during her exile from community and that may come from their own experience of loneliness. Langford specifically selected women whom she thought would be able to empathize with ‘Me’ and perhaps conform with the way that Langford herself read the photographs. Therefore, one may assume a degree of commonality with their experiences.

Can We Rely on Our Memories?

Naturally, we share many experiences that are influenced by various aspects of our lives including education, culture and society. However, the multifarious diversity of the world in which we live dictates that there are many experiences that are individual within our society and, as a consequence, one person’s reading of a scenario may differ significantly to that of another person in the same society witnessing the same thing. Therefore, the variable nature of interpretation forces us to re-contextualize what we see so that it fits with our own individual reality.

When we read an image, the brain processes the information it receives from the eyes, analyzes this incomplete sensory information and compares it with what we know of our environment based on past experience, before generating an internal perception of the scene. Of course, an image being viewed may not be a direct representation of an historical event from one’s own past but it may trigger a memory by way of association and, by drawing from experience, we are delving into our memories. However, can we rely on our memories as accurate accounts of the past?

Professor Steven Novella, an academic neurologist, writes about how humans interact with their memories. Novella states that humans cannot rely on their memories as accurate accounts of past events and, furthermore, we actually contaminate our memories by altering information.

> *"Past events become contaminated. Memory contamination occurs when we incorporate details that we are exposed to after an event into the memory of the event itself."* (Novella, 2012 p.31)

If this is how the brain functions, then our memories of the past must be called into question and this theory may be applied when reading photographs. For example, consider when photographs are used to help recall past moments: we assume that the photographs are factual but how accurate is our reading of the images? Furthermore, do we reconstruct scenarios to fit with the photographs, as Novella's writing suggests?

> *"Much of what we remember and believe is flawed or simply wrong. Our brains seem to constantly generate false observations, memories, and beliefs - and yet we tend to take the truth of our experiences for granted."* (Novella, 2012 p.1)

Novella's writing encourages us to examine how a human attempts to make order of the world. Moreover, we may actually reconstruct the past and subsequently become affected by events and past traumas that may or may not have occurred, resulting in confabulation. For example, Jonathan K. Foster (2009) writes that people can suffer disturbances in their memory of violent situations. In such circumstances, self-preservation is the priority and one's mind is more concerned with escape or defence than details such as the appearance of the perpetrator.

Foster notes a peculiar and, perhaps, ironic example of memory bias that was caused by a traumatic experience. Donald Thompson was actively arguing for the unreliability of eyewitness evidence and appeared on a television show to debate the topic. Thompson was arrested for rape some time after the TV show was aired, however, he had an alibi as the rape was committed at the same time that he was appearing on television and he had many witnesses. It would seem

that the woman's memory of the traumatic event had been contaminated and the face that she recalled during the attack was not that of the rapist but that of Donald Thompson, who was on the television screen at the same time as the attack. Therefore, the reliability of eyewitness statements and our ability to memorize traumatic events is called into question.

Everything we experience and think becomes a memory and we may also consider the effect of less traumatic, everyday events on our memory. Novella (2012 p.1) writes:

> *"We rely upon our memories as if they were accurate recordings of the past, but the evidence shows that we should be highly suspicious of even the most vivid and confident memories. We don't recall memories as much as we reconstruct and update them, altering the information every time we access it. Our brains also fill in gaps by making up information as needed."*

Therefore, our later life experiences influence how we recall past events and so our memories become contaminated as we include details that we experience after an event into our recollection of that event itself. Additionally, Novella argues that memory is not a passive recording but is constructed as we invent details to reinforce emotional themes and construct a consistent narrative to justify those beliefs: *"The default mode of human psychology is to arrive at beliefs for largely emotional reasons and then employ our reason*" (Novella, 2012). This theory can be used to describe how we initially attach meaning to a previously unseen work of visual art. For example, our emotions force us to make quick decisions and art, which prompts certain responses to emotions that we have all experienced, such as happiness, anxiety, fear or sadness, causes us to act upon that emotion.

If our memories are affected by later life experiences, then perhaps dreams may also have an influence and this raises more questions. Novella states that we

have a reality-testing module, which is not as active during a dream than when we are awake. He suggests that we accept strange occurrences in our dreams that make no sense when we are awake and believes that psychosis is a lack of reality testing.

There are certain comments by Novella, which seem to relate to my experience of witnessing someone suffering with mental illness. For example, he writes that:

> *"We construct a narrative, which has emotions and themes attached to it, and we alter details in order to be in line with our thematic narrative."* (Novella, 2012 p.31)

Psychosis

One of the primary examples of psychotic illness is schizophrenia and it is believed that one percent of our population will experience it at some point in their lifetime. Christopher Frith and Eve Johnstone describe a patient suffering with psychosis as having *"lost touch with reality in the sense that he or she believes things that cannot possibly be true."* (Frith and Johnstone, 2003). Furthermore, French psychiatrist, Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol wrote in 1838, about monomania, a pathological condition that affects a person with an otherwise sound mind, and his description may be used to describe a symptom of psychosis:

> *"The patients seize upon a false principle, which they pursue without deviating from logical reasoning, and from which they deduce legitimate consequences, which modify their affections, and the acts of their will. Aside from this partial delirium, they think, reason and act like other men."*[5]

The symptoms described by Esquirol are extreme and because they are so far

[5] http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/schizophrenia/Pages/Introduction.aspx

removed from our experience of reality it may be difficult to appreciate how a person can believe such things. Kurt Jaspers aptly describes *"an abyss of difference between psychosis and normal consciousness."* (Jaspers, 1962) However, it would appear that although delusional behavior may seem extreme, it is not so far removed from "normal" brain functioning except that it is massively exaggerated.

Frith and Johnstone (2003) note that audio hallucinations may be the inner speech of a person who is suffering with psychosis and we have all experienced that, as most normal thinking involves inner speech. For example, we may discuss problem solving with ourselves or prepare for an interview by rehearsing what to say and also, we imagine how people will respond to us. Naturally, we do not know how people will react to our comments but we may try to predict it and play out the unreal scenario in our minds. Therefore, we create a version of reality from something that has yet to happen. Some may even assume that the scenario will happen until it is proved otherwise. This type of reasoning is not dissimilar to the thought process of someone who is suffering with mental illness except that a sane individual should be able to distinguish his or her own ideas and thoughts from reality but this is not the case for someone who is mentally ill. Sadly, many delusions involve scenarios that are far more distressing than those mentioned above and for the person who is suffering the potential consequences appear very real. Peter Chadwick and Max Birchwood (1994) describe some of the symptoms:

> *"Frequently, the voices tell patients to do and believe unpleasant things, and they may threaten that terrible things will happen if their commands are not obeyed."*

Frith and Johnstone comment further:

> *"Many of the delusions reported by patients with schizophrenia seem to*

result from a combination of an abnormal experience with a willingness to develop extremely unlikely explanations for that experience."

Chadwick and Birchwood also comment, *"the distressing thing about auditory-hallucinations is not so much hearing voices per se, but what the voices say."* However, I would argue that it is not only the delusions that are frightening for some patients. It is also the knowledge that they have little control of their mind and, additionally, there may be no reason offered to explain why they are suffering with this condition. Sir Aubrey Lewis quotes an account written in 1967 by an eighteen-year-old who was suffering with psychosis, in which the young man described what he was feeling:

"I am more and more losing contact with my environment and with myself… What remains is only an abstract knowledge of what goes on around me and of the internal happenings in myself… My fate when I reflect upon it is the most horrible one can conceive of. I cannot picture anything more frightful than for a well-endowed cultivated human being to live through his own gradual deterioration fully aware of it all the time. But that is what is happening to me."

John Perceval struggled tirelessly to understand his psychotic experiences and wrote an insightful account of his psychosis:

"I began to hear voices, at first only close to my ear, afterwards in my head, or as if one was whispering in my ear, - or in various parts of the room. These voices I obeyed or endeavoured to obey, and believed almost implicitly… Those voices commanded me to do, and made me believe a number of false and terrible things."(Bateson, 1961 p.265)

Perceval developed a remarkable understanding of his illness as Gregory Bateson (1961) describes in the introduction to 'Perceval's Narrative':

"He discovers also that his voices are remarkably unreliable, that what they promise does not happen; and he recognizes that every such contradictory experience, while unpleasant, contributes to his recovery… He discovers the power of his imagination to create perceptions and images, either in the ear or in the eye, and this relieves much of his anxiety regarding the phenomena of hallucination… But in spite of all these discoveries, his voices are still in some sense real to him."

Therefore, it would appear that even though Perceval had tremendous insight into the symptoms of his condition, the hallucinations and voices remained as real as the voices inside the mind of a person who is not suffering with mental illness.

Mary Elene Wood (2013) comments on Perceval, *"He discovered what we would today call the 'Freudian Unconscious' and related this system to a phenomena of what Freud later called the 'psychopathology of everyday life'."* Wood draws a comparison between Perceval, Freud and William Blake: *"His (Perceval's) theoretical position is perhaps midway between that of Freud and that of William Blake. What Blake called the Creative Imagination Perceval assigns to some inner action of the Almighty."*

Sigmund Freud wrote 'Psychopathology of Everyday Life' in 1901 and in this text Freud discusses how the unconscious impulses and thoughts among humans are not dissimilar, no matter what their mental state, and there is a fine line between abnormal and normal psyche. A. A. Brill translated Freud's text in 1914 and comments on Freud's belief in the introduction to the paper:

"It was while tracing back the abnormal to the normal state that Professor Freud found how faint the line of demarcation was between the normal and neurotic person, and that the psychopathologic mechanisms so glaringly observed in the psychoneuroses and psychoses could usually be

demonstrated in a lesser degree in normal persons... With great ingenuity and penetration the author throws much light on the complex problems of human behavior, and clearly demonstrates that the hitherto considered impassable gap between normal and abnormal mental states is more apparent than real."

However, Freud was remarking on psychoneurosis, which is thought to be a rather 'milder' mental illness, with symptoms that may include: obsessive behaviour, anxiety and hypochondria. These symptoms are not as severe as those associated with schizophrenia, where a person's behaviour appears to be bizarre and inexplicable. One can understand why the illness evokes such fear, however, delusions appear to be massive magnifications of reasonable fears and anxieties that many people may have experienced. The main difference is that the person who is suffering with the illness is unable to rationalize between what is actually happening in the world and what is really happening in their mind.

Conclusion - An Irrefutable Reality

The question with regards to reality and the unreal is very complex and we are rarely troubled by problems of reality in our lives. For example, Frith and Johnstone (2003) comment: *"It never occurs to us to doubt that the world we perceive through our senses is the real world, the same world that is perceived by everyone else."* Sadly, this is not the case for a person who is suffering with psychosis and Frith and Johnstone continue: *"The person who is hallucinating is having perceptual experiences that are not part of the real world as experienced by everyone else."* The hallucinations are not part of the world as witnessed by others, but exist in his or her mind, however, s/he is certain that they are real.

My current practice addresses the theory that we invent reality to suit our emotional state and asks the viewer to consider our notion of reality when compared to the reality of a person who believes things that when examined

rationally appear untrue, for example, someone who is suffering with psychosis. There is a giant leap in context between the inner thoughts of the sane and the insane but some hallucinations are not so far removed from reality that they should be deemed absolutely untrue. For example, a person may believe that they are in constant and immediate danger but, in the real world, people are murdered in their homes, kidnapping does happen and people do get violently attacked.

Certainly, the existence of hallucinations confirms that our notion of reality is tenuous. Furthermore, how can we be certain that our perception of the world is not merely a creation of our own disrupted minds? Frith and Johnstone refer to Rene Descartes' aphorism, 'I think, therefore I am' and write:

> *"We can't be sure of our senses because, as the occurrence of hallucinations shows, these sights and sounds might be created in our brains (Descartes imagined that they were created by a malicious demon). Likewise, our memories of the past might have been created a few seconds ago. All that is left for us to be sure about, Descartes concludes, is the existence of our thinking selves."* (Frith and Johnstone, 2003 p.150)

Alois Reigl considered the work of art to be incomplete without the perceptual and emotional involvement of the viewer and this body of work explores how the viewer interacts with visual art, based on the psychology of perception and in particular what the viewer brings to a work of art. It considers how the viewer re-contextualizes images and reconstructs them so that they fit within the world that they know and it also encourages the viewer to add meaning to a picture and transform it into a depiction of how he or she sees the world, which is not dissimilar to the thought process of someone suffering with psychosis.

With the belief that memory is re-contextualized through experience, I am addressing the uncertainty of perception and questioning whether we can trust

our memories to be an accurate account of our past, by examining the complex and constantly evolving relationship that exists between one's history and one's present. For a person suffering with mental illness, seemingly simple events can take on a completely different meaning and the sufferer will create narratives that fit with their delusions. These delusions may be related to many things, for example, traumatic experiences in their past, dreams that are triggered by historical events, a recent situation that has been misread or even a combination of many different scenarios. Naturally, it would be extremely difficult for a sane person, with no experience or knowledge of psychosis, to visualize or even comprehend what a sufferer is thinking. Therefore, the challenging aspect of my work is to attempt to relay the experiences of people suffering hallucinations to the viewer in a way that is accessible to them. The work is deliberately ambiguous so that it allows the viewer to experience the process of mentally constructing a reality from visual clues, which may be concealing a completely different truth.

For example, I made the following image by re-photographing a photograph that I took around thirty years ago. A section of that scene is depicted which I have zoomed in on and re-photographed a number of times. I employed different photographic techniques to create an image with more ambiguity than the original. This image represents a memory of an event that may have been contaminated over time. My intention is to encourage the viewer to question the truth in what they see. Furthermore, the image represents my experience of spending a number of months with someone who was suffering from delusions during a psychotic episode. I have zoomed in on a particular aspect, so that the scene fits within a scenario inline with a specific delusion. I know what is happening because I have seen this section of the image within its original context but, for a person who is suffering with delusions, the only thing that matters is this image, which is their sole focus and it is unshakeable.

The image is of a real event and has not been manipulated to include things that

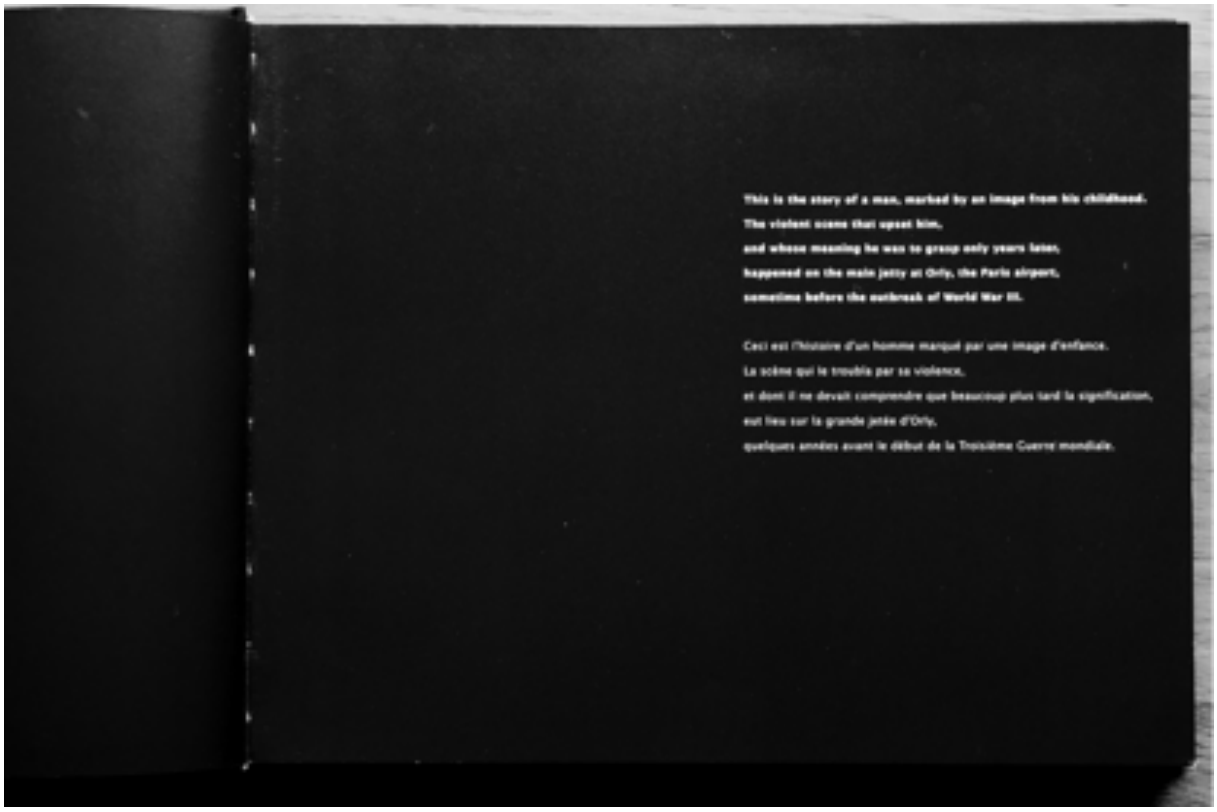
were not there. However, it may elicit a different response from someone who does not have the full picture or perhaps chooses to see only what they believe to be true.

Naturally, I could add a title to the image and thus add context but I do not want to lead the viewer along a particular thought process. For the image to be successful within the wider body of work the viewer must bring something to the image without being prompted by text. Therefore, I am required to find a device that enables the viewer to access my story. Comparing still versus moving image is an interesting approach. Indeed, one may argue that moving images provide the viewer with a reality that is more accessible. Vernon (1971 p.97) comments, "*It is true that the movements depicted in films produce an impression of vitality and immediacy which is lacking in still pictures."* However, I disagree and argue that certain images can remain with the viewer for as long as scenes within movies. For example, when one recalls a movie s/he may only remember a very short passage or scene and seldom the entire film, whereas, a single strong

image can be recalled long after many of the scenes in a film are forgotten. Furthermore, it depends upon the level of connection between the viewer and work. Vernon also comments, *"attention and motivation affect perception considerably."* Therefore, it falls upon the artist to ensure that an image remains with the viewer and one technique is to create a series of images that tell a story.

Chris Marker used sequencing of still images to create a story and this strategy is effective when asking the viewer to receive a whole body of work and from that to attribute a meaning, although, Marker's film 'La Jetee' includes audio narration and the book includes text to tell the story.

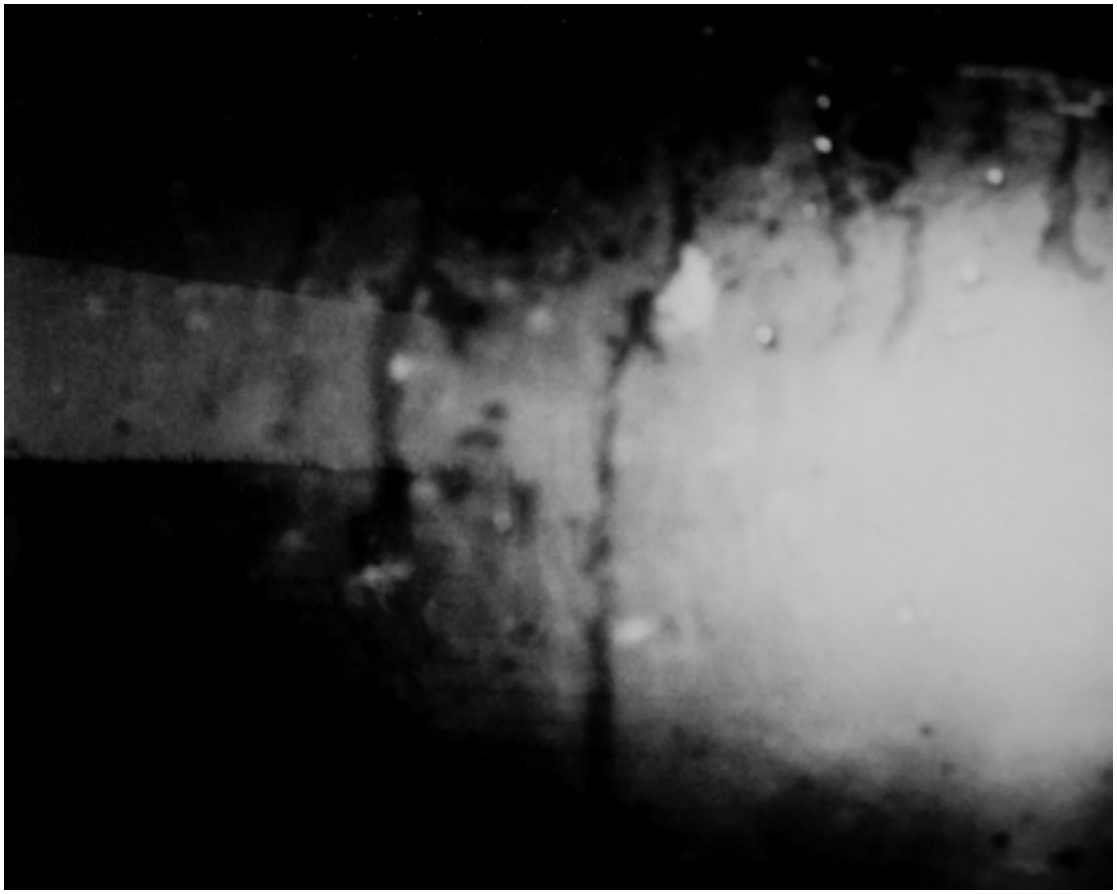
The images that follow are taken from the book version of the 1964 film 'La Jetee' and show stills and accompanying text by Marker.[6]



[6] Marker, (2008) La Jetee book designed by Bruce Mau

The sequencing of images provides the viewer with a narrative and the inclusion of text adds context. However, I want to encourage those who view my work to question what they are seeing and to achieve this I am creating ambiguous images, although, placing the images in a sequence may prompt the viewer to create their own narrative from a body of work that is *"other than the sum of its parts"*.[7] I have included some of my images as an example of sequencing designed to encourage the viewer to complete a visual story:

[7] Reference to Gestalt psychology and in particular the study of behaviour and perception.



The images I have created for this work reflect conversations that I had with my friend and specific delusions that she experienced during the episode of illness, for example: drug abuse, violence, kidnapping and sexual assault. It recalls conversations during which I tried over and over again to convince my friend that what she was seeing in her mind was not actually happening for everyone else

and was, therefore, not real. That is when I knew for certain that she was incredibly ill.

Medical professionals, with whom I have spoken, say that the causes of psychosis are many and difficult to determine precisely. Certainly, past traumas contribute significantly to the onset of illness and people with whom I have met during my research confirm histories that include memories of: strict authoritarian parenting, child abuse, attempted suicide, self-medicating with narcotics, exposure to criminal activity, violence, abusive relationships and high levels of emotional stress. Perhaps some episodes are caused by an accumulation of disturbing events and these experiences affect how a person perceives the world. Ultimately, a period of high stress causes the mind to race uncontrollably as memories of the past become entangled with experiences of the present, which the brain has difficulty reconciling, thus, resulting in mental illness.

I have created a body of work that should be confusing for the viewer. It has to be intense and unbelievable but not inconceivable. Photography is an effective medium for this work as photographs represent something that actually happened. Indeed, everything depicted in my images was real and it did happen but not necessarily as may be perceived in the final body of work.

In this dissertation, I have discussed how we bring our individual experiences to visual art and, therefore, the images will be read differently depending on the experience of the viewer. Indeed, some viewers might dismiss the images much in the same way as a sane person would dismiss the delusions of an insane person as unreality.

I hope this work will suggest that, although psychosis is a terrible and immensely frightening illness, it is not so far removed from ‘normal life’ as one might imagine, as the question of what is ‘normal’ is a long debated philosophical concept.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Text by Alfred Steiglitz, 1942. *'How the Steerage Happened'*

"Early in June, 1907, my small family and I sailed for Europe. My wife insisted upon going on the 'Kaiser Wilhelm II' - the fashionable ship of the North German Lloyd at the time.... How I hated the atmosphere of the first class on the ship. One couldn't escape the 'nouveaux riches'.... On the third day I finally couldn't stand it any longer. I had to get away from that company. I went as far forward on deck as I could.... As I came to the end of the deck I stood alone, looking down. There were men and women and children on the lower deck of the steerage. There was a narrow stairway leading up to the upper deck of the steerage, a small deck right at the bow of the steamer. To the left was an inclining funnel and from the upper steerage deck was fastened a gangway bridge which was glistening in its freshly painted state. It was rather long, white, and during the trip remained untouched by anyone.

On the upper deck, looking over the railing, there was a young man with a straw hat. The shape of the hat was round. He was watching the men and women and children on the lower steerage deck. Only men were on the upper deck. The whole scene fascinated me. I longed to escape from my surroundings and join these people.... I saw shapes related to each other. I saw a picture of shapes and underlying that of the feeling I had about life. And as I was deciding, should I try to put down this seemingly new vision that held me people, the common people, the feeling of ship and ocean and sky and the feeling of release that I was away from the mob called the rich - Rembrandt came into my mind and I wondered would he have felt as I was feeling. ... I had but one plate holder with one unexposed plate. Would I get what I saw, what I felt? Finally I released the shutter. My heart thumping, I had never heard my heart thump before. Had I gotten my picture? I knew if I had, another milestone in photography would have been reached, related to the milestone of my 'Car Horses' made in 1892, and my 'Hand of Man' made in 1902, which had opened up a new era of photography, of seeing. In a sense it would go beyond them, for here would be a picture based on related shapes and on the deepest human feeling, a step in my own evolution, a spontaneous discovery.

I took my camera to my stateroom and as I returned to my steamer chair my wife said, 'I had sent a steward to look for you.' I told her where I had been. She said, 'You speak as if you were far away in a distant world.' and I said I was. 'How you seem to hate these people in the first class.' No, I didn't hate them, but I merely felt completely out of place."

Appendix 2

James E. Cutting, 2006. *'Mere Exposure and Culture'*

The central argument in this chapter is that the laboratory phenomenon mere exposure (Zajonc, 1968, 1980) can be generalized to our broader culture in important ways. I claim it is part of the fabric of establishing and maintaining an artistic canon. Through repeated occurrences of objects and (events in our lives, we acquire information and attitudes, and we do so nonconsciously. This process helps shape our preferences, even our aesthetic preferences. It is a biologically sensible mechanism and it works for many kinds of creatures. For example, by having an animal exposed to a home environment, it will grow to like it, feel comfortable in it, and generally prefer it to strange environments. Such a mechanism keeps toddlers and the young of many species nearby their caregivers. Moreover, as human beings grow up, they enlarge upon the familiarities of their domiciles to include the familiarities of the neighborhoods, and eventually for those of their culture, both broadly and narrowly defined.

Mere exposure is a phenomenon related to implicit learning (see Seamon et al., 1995). That is, we are unaware that it is happening, but the focus of this learning is deeply connected to affect. Consider pictures, from childhood through college and throughout adulthood, we are exposed to a myriad of images. Only a few of these concern art and most are representations of art, but occasionally during a museum visit we may see the artwork itself. But whether the image is an artwork or not, we often do not remember it, much less where we saw it. We often do not even recognize it when we see it again. Nonetheless, its trace is left within us. It is easily demonstrated that our history with it can influence our future judgments. Such effects result from simply being in a culture populated with cultural artifacts (see Zajonc, 1970).

Laboratory evidence suggests that what we' are exposed to, and then prefer, can be quite meaningless (see Bornstein, 1989); line drawings, polygons, ideographs, nonsense words or syllables, sounds. But they can also be meaningful-photographs of objects or people, or even music (Szpunar, Schellenberg, & Pliner, 2004).