Living Images: The Photographic Error as Embodied Knowledge

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Introduction

I like photographs that have gone wrong. A photograph that either through some technological fault or human error, has not come out right: that doesn't represent the scene in front of the camera according to the intentions of the photographer. This can include a wide range of potential and familiar photographic 'errors' – motion blur, light leaks, de-focussing, over or under exposure, poor framing, inadvertent cropping, or combinations of these things.

As an artist and photographer I have been attracted to these off-kilter, awkward images for some time. To find out if my interests were shared with others I started a research project called *In Pursuit of Error[1]* through which I invited people to send me their photographic errors and share with me how the images had come about and what they felt about them. The project has enabled me to investigate how photographers interpret mistakes in their own work, to what extent it is welcomed and sought, and to explore the relevance of the error in the context of digital photography today.

The creative activity of photography is unique in being a complex fusion of human agency and technological processes. In this context of combined endeavour, the photographic error offers a different way of seeing the world. One on hand this 'seeing' is offered by the instrument of the camera, a sort of machine-vision, which creates an image without much intervention from the photographer and in so doing presents an alternative way of viewing the world governed by technological and computational rules. On the other hand, the error reflects human ways of seeing which are partial, subjective and affected by our bodily actions and the contexts of time and place.

The photographic error can also be set against the prevailing cultural assumptions of photographic production and consumption which govern our contemporary image-world. By this I mean the dominant ideologies of the digital consumer camera market which seeks and values automation, simplicity, and veracity in photography and photographs; striving toward the goal of clearer, better images, quickly and easily achieved.

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. The fact that these images have been retained long enough to be shared also suggests the value that the creators put on these error-images; often contributors indicate a sense of curiosity, or potential, which compelled them to keep the image.

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[1] www.inpursuitoferror.co.uk

The main aspect that I ask contributors to comment upon is how the photograph occurred: whether accidentally, or as a result of some deliberate action on their part. The distinction is not necessarily noticeable visually, and it does not negate an error if it is deliberate, because in either case the outcome cannot be predicted. However, the distinction between accidental and deliberate errors provides an insight into the interactions between photographer and camera in the act of photographing.

Accidental errors – machine vision and the photographic event

Modern camera programmes have become more sophisticated, and more oblique, as the menus and options stack up. The increasing automation of photography takes much of the decision-making out of the hands of the photographer, programming out the fallibilities that may beset the amateur in order to produce 'better' pictures. This automation produces images that are 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 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 (Philips 2009: 337). 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.

Camera-seeing involves a translation from that event to this image, with the camera placing its own perspective onto the image that is produced. This reveals as a fallacy our notion that the camera is somehow objective or that photography is a form of seamless transmission. To understand the subjectivity of the camera therefore exposes notions of the objectivity of 'truth' of the photograph as a lie and offers a radically different way of conceiving the camera as a linked subjective presence in the creation of the image.

Deliberate errors – performing photography and subverting the programme

The camera is a tool which 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.

These performative and embodied action point to a different type of engagement with the camera that moves beyond the conventional. Deliberate movement and subversion of the camera settings are means through which the photographer asserts their physical presence

into the photographic act, creating unexpected outcomes – 'outwitting the camera's rigidity' as Flusser would say (Flusser, 2000: 80).

The question that arises is why photographers would deliberately choose to create errors in the first place. It's likely that the automation of the camera and the unknowability of the black box combine to create 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 photography through an engagement with its fundamental principles of light and time.

The deliberate error foregrounds the performativity of the photographic event in the same way that the accidental error foregrounds the subjective vision of the camera. 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 photograph**ing** – 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.

Subverting the programme – re-embodying photography

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 these concepts of mastery are apparent in the developmental drive to make 'better' images, faster and with less human intervention.

The symbolic connection between mastery and technology is played out in the continual innovation and development of camera technologies designed to remove the subjective unreliability of the human element. 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.

Reviewing the history of photography one might consider the first subversive photographer to be Julia Margaret Cameron. Cameron took up photography enthusiastically when the medium was in its infancy and became a well-respected professional, moving photography away from simple documentary practices toward staged and constructed scenarios which referenced a rich tradition of literature and painting.

A signifying feature of Cameron's photographs is a deliberate softness of focus. Fully cognizant of the technical features of the camera, Cameron deliberately chose to pursue this effect in her images, subverting the 'correct' procedure for focussing in pursuit of her own artistic interpretation (Cameron 1890). By pursuing her own vision, rather than the accepted and correct mode of usage, Cameron had defied the, at this time highly masculine orthodoxy of obeying the parameters of the technology, flouting the 'rules' by which 'proper' photographs could be judged (Weaver 1984).

Cameron used her embodied knowledge to respond to what she saw through the lens rather than carry out a set of functions based on a rules and optics. Cameron's approach exposes a different kind of engagement with the camera in which her negotiation with the technology created a new form of image-making which moves her photography beyond conventions.

This type of negotiation with the parameters of a technology is what Sherry Turkle (1990) defines as 'soft mastery'. 'Soft mastery'; the capacity to bend the rules, to negotiate and relate, can be seen in how photographers approach the creation of deliberate errors. 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 and its functions to place decisions and actions in the path of the photographic event in order to subvert and explore the extent of their photography.

Thus an embodied knowledge is relational and negotiates with technology in order to produce unexpected results.

Surprise, wonder and not-knowing

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 (Sawyer 2000: 152). 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. Understanding the error requires interpretation because it is not immediately assimilable; we have to pore over the image contents and rebuild the (possible) circumstances of its creation in our mind. The error is an in-between space, a gap between action and contemplation, which is open to wonder.

Lucy Irigaray constructs wonder as a space which is ungoverned by linear time, an 'in-stance' rather than a fixed certainty, an in-between space which bridges two zones of perception, the time then and the time now (Irigaray 2004: 64). The error forms a bridge to our understanding of photography as action and event, reminding us of the inherent unknowability of the relationship between situation, camera and photographer which occurs during the photographic act.

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, contingency and error 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.

In the third dimension of the error we can begin to question the photographic practices and images which we are surrounded with daily. We can ask what purpose and meaning photography has to us: what are we trying to *do* when we take a photograph?

It is relevant finally, to make the distinction between errors and failures. The concept of failure implies a breakdown, a stopping point. At the point of failure one stops and reconsiders, remakes or reverses. This is not the case with the photographic error. Failure is an absence of being, whereas the error is a presence which suggests a wealth of possible interpretations.

The photographic error is therefore a point of possibility; of potential. It is not a failure but a sidestep, an interstice that allows something else about photography, the hidden and unremarked aspects of time, light, mechanics, computation and actions to be made visible. Our loss of control, our dashed expectations, show us a different way to relate to our tools; not as passive operators but as collaborators and experimenters. The error returns us to wonder.

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