

The Reality and Experience of Viewing—Visual Construction and Spiritual Intension of Concept Photography

WANG Zhi-jun

Academy of Fine Arts, Shanxi University, Taiyuan, Shanxi 030006, China

This article begins with the construction and meaning of conceptual photography, analyzes its aesthetic attitude, and proposes that the reading experience of conceptual photography works through expression of meaning and how to embody its spiritual connotation in the creative process, and “watch” the conceptual photography works become the act of interpreting a kind of figurative object, which makes the aesthetic experience of photography works fully realized.

Keywords: reading, aesthetic standards, field of vision, conceptual photography, experience, vision

Introduction

“Whoever wants to think must ask questions. ... This is the reason why all understanding always goes beyond simply rethinking of the opinions of someone else. Because asking questions is to open up various possibilities of meaning, so that something meaningful is incorporated into one’s own opinions”, said by Gadamer.

Conceptual photography appeared in the mid-1990s. The concept and expression method of such works are novel. It breaks through the original restrictions and forms a huge cultural gap and aesthetic gap with the mainstream photography model. It is expressed as a new art style independent of report photography and record photography. As a new expression method and concept carrier of art, it greatly enriches individual’s daily visual experience, and this picture art based on photography once again broadens the field of photography, further activates photographer’s imagination and expressiveness, and more intuitively conveys people’s perception. In the world of conceptual photography work, photos are no longer simply records of history, moments, horizons, and emotions, but have become carriers of the relationship between the artist’s subjective consciousness and objective objects. The objective object can be not only the environment, space or building, but also the made-up image.

Conceptual photography has changed the identity of pictorial symbol. From its previous pretending to be available to current pretending to be not available, “the former implies a theology of truth and secret, and the latter begins an era of simulation”, said by Jean Baudrillard.

Conceptual photography in the true sense does not mean expressing a very complete concept through photography. The meaning of conceptual photography lies in a certain concept conveyed through photography. It

is an exploration process that has got rid of the shallow unintentional entanglement. It tries to show the analysis on the state of human existence by the medium of photography and raises some interesting topics, triggering more and deeper thinking. Therefore, conceptual photography often does not give an answer, but have a variety of possible directions for the audience to understand. It is very difficult to completely and accurately express a concept by photography no matter via what kind of medium. The interest in concept expression is in the process of continuous improvement and discussion, rather than relying on one or several media to convey it clearly. The involvement of photography in conceptual art also requires more media to make a comprehensive interpretation.

The Vision Construction of Conceptual Photography

“Simulation does not conceal the truth, but truth covers the place where there is no truth. Simulation is true”. This sentence in the “Bible Ecclesiastes” just illustrates the meaning of being visually true.

How to construct and control vision is a core issue of contemporary visual culture research and design research. After the emergence of photography, its influence on traditional formative art is most mostly reflected in that it has changed the visual relationship between formative art and the real world. Previously, painting and sculpture both regarded the true reflection of the world as the basic goal. The emergence of photography should be the end of this goal. Painting and sculpture begin to look for opportunities and growth points in terms of subjects, style, and technical means. When the era of picture reading comes and visual culture becomes a mainstream form of contemporary culture and constantly affects people, we can't help but pay attention to some important issues in the new cultural phenomenon.

Photography is an image capture, but can also be an emotional record. Unlike pure documentary photography, conceptual photography emphasizes more ideological concepts, and photography is endowed with preconceived conceptual connotations and then used to create an artistic dreamland. Conceptual photography is actually closer to conceptual art. It can be said to be the way of expression of conceptual art by photography. In this way, conceptual photography deviates from traditional art photography in terms of understanding, which invalidates the standards of traditional art photography, or liberates photography art from the single standard of traditional art photography. The daily way of photography makes a large number of non-photography professional visual artists try photography, and implants the art experience of other professions into the art of photography, making photography showing a new appearance. Conceptual photography has developed a new space for photographic art because of its deviation from traditional artistic photography. The potential determinants of experimental art are brand-new living experience and life experience. Many artists have made continuous efforts in the development of the photography method itself, integrated different visual experiences in conceptual photography, making conceptual photography more experimental and provides photography with many new possibilities to reveal contemporary life.

Contemporary human's visual experience and reading behavior are gradually transforming from reading printed text to interpreting visual images. “In addition to traditional visual art styles such as painting, sculpture, architecture, handicrafts, drama, and dance, mass media such as photography, film, and television have penetrated into people's daily life, and human experience becomes more visual and concrete than ever before. The popularity of multimedia computer networks has made this visual experience ubiquitous” (An overview of visual culture, Zhang Shuyu, 2003, p. 13). This has led to major changes in reading objects, reading methods,

reading nature, reading psychology and functional value. “Viewing” is no longer a simple act. “Vision” is no longer the general meaning of “seeing” and “reading”, but refers specifically to interpreting a certain kind of concrete object. Visual aesthetics is often an insight of “seeing the essence through phenomena”. The two elements that enable the process of aesthetic experience are: the cultural resources that can stimulate this experience and the psychological quality that can be deeply experienced.

Reading Experience of Conceptual Photography

Traditional reading behavior itself is a unique cultural interest and feeling. “What I can do is to transform my ignorance into reality”, Roland Barthes said. As Mr. Miao Xiaochun said, “I am taking pictures in the form of painting. When I changed photography, I also preserved the characteristics of photography: all the details are real”. (Interview with Miao Xiaochun, 2017, Yachang Art Network)

If something is not only experienced, but its experience existence also acquires a characteristic that makes itself continue to exist, this thing belongs to experience. What becomes an experience in this way completely acquires a new state of existence in artistic expression (“Truth and Methodology” by Hans-Geor Gadamer, 2004, p. 79). When facing a conceptual photography work, how should we understand and experience it, and what attitude should we take to control the judgment on it?

We know that in visual arts, all expressions of world experience are conveyed by language. We can interpret reading itself as an interpretation of what words and images mean. The expression of meaning is first and foremost a display of visual language. Any rational interpretation that helps others to understand must have the characteristics of language. “Understanding must be regarded as a part of the event of meaning. It is precisely in understanding that the meaning of all statements, including the meaning of artistic statements and the meaning of all other circulating statements, can be formed and completed” (“Truth and Method” by Hans-Georg Gadamer, 2004, p. 217). Gadamer believes that the work of art circulated from the past and strange worlds to the world today not only is a kind of aesthetic appreciation object that ponders the ancient feelings and expresses the content expressed at the time, but is also to express a kind of thought to us today.

Everything that can be called experience is built in memory. ... But on the other hand, there is also an opposition between life and concept in the concept of experience. Experience has a remarkable direct nature of all intentions free from its meaning. All experienced things are self-experiences, and together constitute the meaning of the experience. Namely, all the experienced things belong to the unity of the self, and therefore contain an irreplaceable association with the whole life. In this regard, what is experienced is not formed by what it transmits and determines as its meaning.

Reading conceptual photography works is essentially a completion process. Traditional reading of photography is a reading behavior with full independence and wide freedom: what to read, how to read, when to read, where to read, the reading speed and perspective, degree of acceptance, acceptance effect and so on differ from person to person, so they present distinctive independence and individual characteristics in every link of the reading process. It is precisely because people's reading, not just the reproduction of works of art, has become a real way of experience, so in fact, reading is similar to the art of photography in the face of a way. In the reading of conceptual photography, people can have their own perspective and focus when they understand an idea and look at an image. The cornerstones of cultural meaning and functional value of traditional reading are the free

creativity of reading and the full imagination in the process of reading. With imagination, the philosophy, thoughts, principles, theorems and so on of the work can be understood by readers through life verification; with imagination, the meaning of the work can be generated and realized, and the value can be reflected.

Just as a work of art that is such an experience is a self-contained world, conceptual photography “as an aesthetic experience of experience also throws away all connections with reality. It seems that the definitive property of art work lies in becoming an aesthetic experience, but that is to say, the power of art work makes the experiencer get rid of his life connection at once, and at the same time returns him to its whole existence. There is a fullness of meaning in the experience of art. This fullness of meaning does not only belong to this particular content or object, but more represents the whole meaning of life” (“Truth and Method” by Hans-Georg Gadamer, 2004, p. 90). An aesthetic experience always contains an experience of an infinite whole. It is precisely because the aesthetic experience does not form a unity of an open experience process, together with other experiences, but directly express the whole, that the meaning of this experience becomes an infinite meaning.

Nietzsche said, “for deep-minded people, all experiences last for a long time”. He means that all experiences are not quickly forgotten, understanding of them is a long process, and their real existence and meaning is exactly in this process, not just in the originally experienced content. In conceptual photography, what the aesthetic experience focuses on should be real work that what it leaves aside is the non-aesthetic elements contained in the work: purpose, function, and content meaning. These elements may be quite important in terms of adapting the work to its world and thus prescribing the entire rich meaning originally unique to the work, but the artistic nature of the work must be distinguished from all these elements.

In addition, the reading of photography is still an event that brings the content of reading into expression. Photography work and the acceptance of it in reading represent a maximum degree of freedom and flexibility. The way in which photographs exist is something unique and incomparable. When they are understood and read, they are so purely spiritual that they are as if they are being stated to us now. So the ability to read is like a secret art, and even like a magic that dispels and attracts us. In the reading process, time and space seem to be abandoned.

Understanding firstly means understanding a thing, and secondly means identifying and understanding the opinions of others. Gadamer believes, “whoever has an aesthetic sense will know the difference between beautiful and ugly, good quality and bad quality; whoever has a historical sense will know what is possible and what is impossible for an era, and have the feeling of difference between the past and the present”. Everyone’s reading and understanding of an artwork is saturated with his own personal experience. Therefore, understanding what the photographic work tells us is a self-experience. However, as an experiencer of reliable things, as a familiarity that contains surprises, artistic experience is an experience in the true sense, but must constantly re-master the task contained in the experience, integrating this experience into the whole positioning of people’s self-understanding of the world and themselves. The meaning expressed by a work of art is by no means only equivalent to the meaning that the artist himself wants to express when creating the work. The meaning of artistic language in the work is multiple. The difference between artistic language and general concept right lies in this inexhaustible implication. Gadamer believes that the language of art means overload of meaning expressed in the work itself. Gadamer discovers, “what kind of in-law relationship exists between the general experience structure and the way of aesthetic existence.

Aesthetic experience is not only an experience among various other experiences, but also reflects the essence of experience itself. Just as this kind of work of art is a self-contained world, aesthetic experience is an experience far from all things related to reality. The work of art seems to be stipulated as an aesthetic experience. That is to say, the power of the work of art suddenly detaches the aesthetic experiencer from the snare of life and returns to his whole existence. There is a fullness of meaning in the experience of art. This meaning belongs not only to this particular content or object, but also to the whole meaning of life. An aesthetic experience always contains experience of an infinite whole. Just because this experience is not combined with other experiences, creating an open stream of experience, but immediately reproduces the whole, the meaning of this experience is infinite.

Conclusion

The advent of the era of visual culture has had a profound impact on the psychological mechanism, behavior, nature and functional value of human reading. Traditional reading behavior itself is a unique cultural interest and feeling, and the more important issue reflected by the evolution of reading behavior is the change in the book's media form and the nature of connotation expressed by it. Human reading behavior is gradually transformed from reading printed text to reading visual text. With the enrichment and changes of human reading objects, contemporary human's visual experience and reading behavior are gradually turning from reading printed text to interpreting visual images. The "viewing" of conceptual photography is no longer a simple act, and is no longer a "seeing" and "reading" in the general sense, but specifically refer to the interpretation of a specific object, and its visual aesthetics has become a kind of sight "seeing essence through phenomena", making the aesthetic experience process of conceptual photography itself fully realized.

References

- Arnheim, R. [US]. (1998). *Art and visual perception* (S. Y. Teng, & J. Y. Zhu, Trans.) (1st ed.). Sichuan: Sichuan People's Publishing House. (in Chinese)
- Arnheim, R. [US]. (1998). *Visual thinking* (S. Y. Teng, Trans.) (1st ed.). Sichuan: Sichuan People's Publishing House. (in Chinese)
- Ben, Y. M. (2002). *Art works in the era of mechanical reproduction*. Zhejiang: Zhejiang Photography Press. (in Chinese)
- Berg, J. [English]. (2005). *Ways of seeing* (X. Y. Dai, Trans.) (1st ed.). Guangxi: Guangxi Normal University Press. (in Chinese)
- Gadamer H. G. [German]. (2004). *Truth and method* (H. Hong, Trans.) (1st ed.). Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House. (in Chinese)
- Ricoeur, P. [French]. (2004). *Living metaphor* (T. J. Wang, Trans.) (1st ed.). Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House. (in Chinese)
- Wang, L. Z. (2005). *Visual art psychology* (1st ed.). Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House. (in Chinese)