

Contemporary Media Forum

Up Close and Personal: Photography Displays in a Physical Space

With the advent of digital technology, far more people are taking photographs than ever before. So too we have witnessed a proliferation of people sharing images, now via the Internet and digital devices, so much so that the in-person experience of a display of photographs has taken a back seat. However, again thanks to digital technology, the means to print one's own photographs has become much easier than in the past, including large and high quality prints.

As a psychologist and photographer who studies how people create, share, and react to images in this age of digital photography and online photo-sharing, I recently turned my attention back to the tradition of an in-person display of photographs. This research led to a photography exhibition *Photographic Psychology: Forces that Shape the Psyche*, which took place at the Rider University Art Gallery in 2012. The exhibition consisted of 60 images with titles and short descriptions for each one (see tinyurl.com/crgy29w). Each image represented a different force that shapes our sense of self and identity, such as family, emotions, dissociation, selfobjects, addiction, separation, childhood trauma, developmental stages, and the unconscious.

The purpose of the exhibition was three-fold: (1) to provide an educational event about ideas related to psychology, especially psychoanalytic concepts; (2) to offer a type of personal growth experience in which people could learn about themselves; (3) to serve a vehicle for conducting research on the use of in-person displays of images, including the interpersonal dynamics that occur when people view the images in this physical environment. Because some people question the practicality of photography prints when sharing images digitally is so easy and widespread, I found this third aspect of the exhibition particularly interesting. What are the advantages of a real-world display?

In this article I would like to summarize the conceptualization, implementation, and outcome of this project. Links to my webpages in Flickr illustrate aspects of the exhibition that I will be discussing. There I created a set of 40 photographs with explanations about the exhibition, entitled “Forces that Shape the Psyche.”

CREATING THE EXHIBITION

Given the very “stop and go” nature of online living, especially when viewing pictures, many people do not devote much attention to the overarching

concept, organization, integration, and flow among a group of images. Displays, and therefore the experience of them, tend to be somewhat random. However, these aspects of a photograph presentation can have a powerful effect on the unconscious impact of the entire display as well as the individual images. So too there is a tendency towards overlooking the importance of how text and image interact with each other – an interaction that reflects the interplay between the conscious and unconscious (Suler, 2013a, 2013b).

I wanted the exhibition to convey the feeling of an “intrapsychic world.” When a person entered the gallery, they would be delving into the human mind with all of its many sectors, layers, and complexities. The photographs varied in size from large 40 × 60 gator board mounted prints to smaller prints in simple black or chrome frames, with this variety in sizes suggesting that some forces shaping the psyche are powerful or conscious, while others are more subtle or unconscious. A variety of visual styles for the photographs contributed to the expression of the concepts depicted in them: very colorful, subdued in colors, monotone, black-and-white, composites, diptychs, realistic, and surreal, with an emphasis towards imaginative images as a way to activate the fantasy-driven thinking of unconscious primary process (Holt, 2008). One prominent feature in several images was my use of “clones,” which entailed several versions of myself interacting with each other, as in “Id, Ego, and Superego” (see tinyurl.com/b5x3qzs). In general, the use of clones in images points to the topographic layering, dissociation, and multiplicities of self and identity (Suler, 2013c).

Some strategies for hanging a display of photographs are considered best practice. The works should be placed at eye level, which is approximately 60 inches from the floor to the center of the image, as well as positioned in a linear flow so that viewers can move easily from one photograph to another. However, breaking such conventions can be an effective way of activating unconscious physical sensations that enhance the meaning of the image. For example, I placed “The Unconscious” at the bottom of a set of three images, forcing viewers to symbolically look down, while “Need for Achievement” appeared at the top of a set of three. Rather than arranged in a strictly linear fashion, many photographs were instead hung, based on their compatibility in colors and visual design, as clusters in order to represent the conscious and unconscious constellations of mental associations that comprise the intrapsychic world. Although groupings could have been based on conceptual similarities concerning the forces shaping the psyche as represented in those photographs, we felt that clusters based on visual style would have a more immediate, sensory, and possibly unconscious impact on viewers. Hanging the photographs in clusters also encouraged us to “activate negative space” – i.e. to delineate the spaces between clusters as a depiction of things unseen and supposedly absent, which is yet another possible symbol of the unconscious.

Some artists prefer to decide themselves how to hang their show. Following the intended interactive spirit of my exhibition, I instead welcomed a group effort, including myself, the director of the art gallery, three design consultants,

and several students from the psychology and fine arts departments. A group endeavor helped insure that the display of images reflected a more collective and diverse set of conscious and unconscious influences rather than the motivations of any one or two people. We talked about various strategies and made deliberate decisions, but I also encouraged people to allow some aspects of hanging the photographs to evolve organically from intuition. This process led to some interesting results. One always pays attention to what photographs fit well into what parts of the room, given the qualities of that physical area and of the images – e.g. we placed the largest images on the largest wall, which became the center stage of the intrapsychic world. However, the photographs that were the last to be hung, which perhaps not surprisingly were all somewhat strange and disturbing images, ended up in the smallest, most difficult to access corner of the gallery. I thought of that area as an effective symbolic expression of potentially anxiety-provoking and repressed unconscious ideation. One of my students simply referred to it as “creep corner” (see tinyurl.com/a6hxx7y).

Among the various interactive features of the exhibition was one large untitled photograph. It was a street photography shot, post-processed to look like an impressionist painting, of a woman and her dog crossing a busy street. Below the photograph was a cartoon drawing of an analyst sitting behind his patient, saying within a bubble extending from his head, “Create a title.” Using black markers, tacks, and small colored squares of paper from a table below the street scene, people could write out a title and tack it next to the photograph (see tinyurl.com/a6mwlr5). On another nearby table, people could pick up various colored markers to write or draw on three matted photographs, even though there were no specific instructions telling them to do so. However, before the opening night of the exhibition, several of my psychology students had “seeded” the photographs with their own writings and drawings, making it apparent to the exhibition visitors that other people had added something of their own to the photographs. These kinds of interactive ways of experiencing images can be valuable expressive and insight-inducing activities for people, and in fact are techniques often used in psychodynamic approaches to art therapy and phototherapy (Weiser, 1993).

As a type of conceptual photography, the exhibition included titles as well as short descriptions of the various forces that shape the psyche, which offered a complex interaction of image and text, more so than the type of display that involves only photographs, or photographs with generic titles and descriptions. As an example, a photograph of a woman cuddling with her cat was entitled “self object” along with this description: “*Whether they are material things, pets, or people, we need ‘objects’ to express who we are, help keep our identity intact, and soothe us.*” Although it is well known in psychology that people interpret images according to their own personality, beliefs, and backgrounds (Zakia, 2007), much less is known about how they react to images when titles and descriptions guide people towards specific realms of meaning about forces that shape the human psyche, including their own.

THE OPENING NIGHT OF THE EXHIBITION

At the opening night of the exhibition, everyone – including the research subjects – received a pamphlet containing the titles and descriptions for all the images, as well as a summary of purpose of the exhibit, with the most basic assumption being that everyone has their own unique reaction to the images, despite my titles and descriptions:

You might see things differently. You might see some of these images as saying something else about the factors that determine your sense of self. There is no right or wrong interpretation. Accepting that we all perceive an image differently is recognizing the fact that we're all unique people with different personalities, interests, and backgrounds. This is the essence of photographic psychology.

This pamphlet indicated that anyone attending the opening of the exhibition was welcome to formally participate in the research project that was taking place that night, although most research subjects were students from psychology classes who volunteered for the study (over 200). The subjects received the same pamphlet as other attendees, as well as another instruction sheet for participating in the research. The instruction sheet informed them to first walk through the whole exhibition to look at all the images, then return to one image that they found particularly interesting or meaningful. For that image, they wrote out their replies to a questionnaire containing the following set of items that I developed for previous research projects:

- What thoughts and feelings immediately come to your mind?
- Describe to yourself or someone else exactly what you see.
- Does this image remind you of anything in your life?
- If you could go into this picture, what would you think, feel, and do?
- What would you change about the image?
- What message might this picture be giving you?
- If you gave a title to this image, to capture what it means to you, what would it be?
- How did being at this exhibition affect you and your reactions to the images?

The pamphlet for everyone at the exhibition also encouraged people to think about these questions. Everyone was encouraged to share with other people their personal reactions to the photographs, the titles people created for the large untitled image, the drawings people added to the matted photographs, and the exhibition in general.

THE GROUP DYNAMICS STUDY

Two weeks after the opening, I conducted the second part of my research project by inviting to the art gallery the 20 students from my Group Dynamics class,

which is an experiential course that emphasizes the development of insights into one's own personality as well as into the interpersonal relationships within the class. We were the only ones in the gallery on that day. I instructed the students to: (1) examine all of the photographs, then select one in which both the image and its title captured something important about a force that has shaped their psyche. They were encouraged to think and write about how that particular image fits them both visually by how the image was designed, as well as in its concept about a force that has influenced their sense of self; (2) select and write about another image and its title that they believed described something important about one of their peers in the class; (3) observe and write about the group dynamics during this exercise – i.e. about the behaviors of individual people, subgroups of people, and the class as a whole. As unobtrusively as possible, I took photographs of them (without flash) for a visual record of what happened.

THE OUTCOME OF THE RESEARCH

As revealed in the self-report responses of the subjects to the questionnaire on the opening night, there was a wide range of emotions, memories, wishes, needs, and fantasies activated by the photographs. The students often made such comments as, "The pictures evoked emotions that I wasn't expecting," "They allowed me to look inside myself more," "I discovered feelings I had forgotten," and "I thought a lot about my life." These results confirm what phototherapists and researchers have long known about the power of visual images to stimulate personal insight. The students also frequently commented on how the exhibit helped them to be more aware, to stop and focus, to become emotionally connected to the photographs, to think more, and to look past the concrete image towards its deeper psychological meanings. Even though my titles and descriptions for the photographs helped activate such experiences, students also felt free to interpret the images in their own way. As one student said, "The exhibit made me feel as if my opinion is important."

Such reactions could very well occur online when viewing photographs, either by oneself or in photo-sharing communities in which images are discussed among people. However, several students offered comments indicating the impact of the exhibit as a *physical* social space. "I really felt connected to those pictures," one student said, "much more so than being in front of a computer." The educational and personal atmosphere that I encouraged in the exhibition also might have played an important role in how people reacted to the photographs. As one student remarked, "I thought more deeply than if I was somewhere else."

Given the long history of psychoanalytic theory that emphasizes the connection between the psyche and the physical self (Muller, 2007; Perrin, 2010), I find myself wondering how viewing images in a physical space – where we move about freely, thereby mobilizing our own bodily expressions as well as witnessing and interacting with the body language of others – might have a significant

conscious and unconscious influence on the personal experience of those images. We might even speculate on how the personal or “transitional” space created by one person’s subjective immersion into the viewing of an image in a physical environment interacts in subtle ways with the personal or transitional space of other people in that environment (Winnicott, 1971).

The students from my group dynamics class, who visited the art gallery several weeks after the opening night, offered additional feedback that confirmed the personal as well as educational effects of the images. Having been trained in methods for observing interpersonal behavior, they also had specific comments about the physical aspects of their experience in the gallery. They noticed the formation and dissolving of subgroups around particular photographs, how some people were “loners” while others socialized, differences in the body language of their peers, changes in levels of conversation and emotional expression, and variations in how quickly people chose a particular photograph to examine and how immersed into it they seemed. I was also curious to discover that the images students picked as a representation of themselves often revolved around feelings of anxiety, stress, and negative emotions in general, while the images they picked as a representation of one of their classmates almost always depicted something they admired about that person (empathy, courage, perseverance, etc.), as if that trait of the other person provided the vehicle for an idealizing transference that could remedy their own negative affect. Clearly, the physical space of the exhibition stimulated many rich levels of experience for understanding oneself as well as one’s relationship to the others who were present. Given the importance of temporality in the experience of self cohesion (Kohut, 1977), we might also speculate on how the viewing of images in an synchronous time frame, along with other people, is quite different than the asynchronous experience of images in online photo-sharing communities. Very few people are really “there” at the same time.

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Over the last decade we have seen a growing idealization of what we can do in computer-mediated environments. Given those beliefs, it is very easy to overlook the millions of years of evolution leading to who we are as bodily beings living in a physical space. Even though visualization is a sensory experience that functions at a distance – and one that can also operate inside our memory, imagination, and dreams while receiving no input from the external world at all – the development of human vision was intimately intertwined with our physical evolution and physical environment, especially when we finally stood up to erectly walk around our habitat (Ornstein, 1992). Although we now have the ability to witness images through the computer screen that carries us into the intangible realm of cyberspace, which is indeed a marvelous supplement to other aspects of our visual life, we should learn to balance and integrate those experiences with the up close and personal experience of sharing images in a physical

space with other people, and to use digital visualizations as a supplement to enhance our visual interactions with the “real” world.

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