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## THE IMAGE AS THE SUSPENSION OF TIME

**T**he originating problem of the image, of art, is the relation between movement and stasis, between process and structure, between time and the timeless, between presence and absence. The function of the image is the suspension of time.

I once visited the Greek island of Mykonos in the heat of the summer. The brilliance and the power of the sun was nearly unbearable, pulsating with physical force from the whitewashed walls, bearing down with painful weight against the body. The shade of walls was a refuge from the violence of the sun against vulnerable flesh. Odors were an intensity of experience, odors of sun-baked herbs from the barren hills above the town, of cooking from houses and restaurants. Vision was an immersion in the whiteness, in the intense blue of the sky, in the narrowness of the streets, the narrow streets as a winding penetration among the heavy cubes of whiteness, the white planes of walls penetrated by the darkness of doors and windows, the cubic forms of the buildings. Dust was the taste of dryness in the mouth. There were the sounds of children playing, the talk of women, the cobbler's hammer, the creaking of boats in the harbor.

Mykonos enclosed me on all sides. Wherever I was I was conscious that there was something behind and to the sides, as a looming presence. The earth was solid under the stones beneath my feet, bearing my weight. The sky was blue lightness above. The buildings filled my field of vision, under sharp focus in the center, a blur of wall and whiteness at the edges. As I moved there was a succession of solids and voids in an uninterrupted flow. Beyond what I was seeing there was the sense of other things, spaces, the extension of the sea, the mystery of the horizon. What I had just seen shaped what I was now seeing; I emerged from the enclosure of a narrow street into the releasing openness of a plaza, then back into the winding pathway of a street.

Time passes as it must but I felt suspended in space. Subliminally I knew time passed; it must be getting close to lunch time; the sun is lower in the sky, it is nearly time to go back to the ship. Yet now I felt suspended out of time, moving through space.<sup>1</sup>

The experience of Mykonos was three dimensional, involving all the senses immersed in both space and time, a totality of sensation.

I look at my slides projected on the screen in our living room. The room is a pleasant 68°. Odors are the mild ones of a middle class house. Mykonos has become a rectangle of colored light on a screen. The sky and the buildings are cool white against cool blue. Narrow streets and the massed cubes of houses become a pleasing arrangement of flat patches of color. My eye reconstructs the depth from flatness. It no longer contains me. I am here, the image is there and is something other than the vanished Mykonos. What I had experienced in time, through motion, my body heavy on the ground, is now a single, detached, abstracted image, suspended before me, to be looked at in the single experience of vision. The image is absolute stillness, absolute quiet.

One reason for all those devices that we put between us and the image, the critic's learned chatter, the collector's display, the historian's industry, the explainer's system, is to protect us against the terror of that stillness, that silence.

The image serves both memory and contemplation. From the image I reconstruct the experience in my mind, relive in memory what is now irretrievably past and gone. Time is suspended.

Equally, the image is a thing in itself, a reminder of something other than itself but itself an object, colored light on a beaded screen before me. Is it art? In the old sense of "art", no. It is a tourist snapshot, made only as a reminder. But of course it is art, an object made for the human function of memory, an object that serves the human purpose of contemplation. While visiting Mykonos, I was a part of a total experience, an active process involving all my senses. The image is an abstraction from that process, taking from it the single experience of colored shapes, sensory experience reduced to the single act of vision. I am reminded of the earlier experience but now, in detachment, I can contemplate it, think about it. Change and

<sup>1</sup> This is a sensation common to all intense physical and emotional experiences. It is one of several reasons for the popularity of sports and other games as well as rituals. The time of the event is marked at the beginning and the end and, for the duration, ordinary time is suspended. The only experienced time is an element of the game.

process are stopped in thought, in a distinctive act of seeing that interprets my experience of Mykonos.

Years later, I returned to Mykonos in October, which is other than the heat of the summer. The sun was not violent pain but pellucid light, playing softly on the white surfaces of the massed cubes. My senses were not so powerfully involved, overwhelmed. I could now contemplate the beautiful forms of Mykonos. Memory was now the memories of my images of Mykonos, closed away in my slide cabinet. I saw streets and houses. I also saw streets and houses as images of themselves, images of my past experience of Mykonos.

My experience of time is now more complex. I am set apart from my ordinary time into the space of Mykonos but I remember, and remembering is the presence of past time. My experience of Mykonos is not so immediate, so pure, as it was the first time, for now I stand a little apart from it to contemplate what is happening to me.

I described my experience of Mykonos almost entirely in terms of complex perceptual experience. That is too simple. I was there from a distant and different country and people, a visitor, a voyeur, an intrusion, not knowing the meaning of the speech I heard in the street, not knowing the names of the people, nor who lived within those walls. I did not only see; I was seen. As what? A stranger, economically useful but otherwise irrelevant, a brief appearance, plodding wearily through the hot streets, then gone. In my image of the world, I am at the center, the world and time spread out around me. To the people of Mykonos I was a minor, unimportant incident in a world that is centered on each of them.

That little church, so often photographed, so picturesque in tourist advertisements and post card souvenirs, is to them an intersection of lives, a place of devotion, the enactment of the dramas of christenings, of marriages, of death.

What of all this can any image show? What is the use of the image? In the face of its obvious inadequacy, how could any image be spoken of as "realistic", "representational"? Are images of no greater use than words in capturing the real, the true?

I spoke of three distinct experiences of Mykonos: the experience from within, for those who enact their lives as a part of Mykonos; my own intense, brief immersions in the experience of Mykonos; my images of Mykonos that serve memory and contemplation. These do not exhaust the experience of the images.

What of those who have not been to Mykonos but see my images? They have no memory of Mykonos to draw on so Mykonos is only a series of images on my screen. For them, it is an imagined experience built up from the information in the images. It cannot serve as reconstruction but as presentation. They can participate in the beauty of Mykonos, insofar as the image selects it, in the beauty of the images to the restricted limits of my own skill as a photographer. They may know more about Mykonos than they did before. They can experience almost nothing of what it was like to be on, in, Mykonos. They see Mykonos as an imagined reality, seen through a window. For them as for me, the distant is made present but present only in part.

Could I, in any way, make my experience of Mykonos present to them? No. Were I a painter, I might show something of the light of the sun but never the feel of the sun on my flesh, never the sounds and odors, never the sense of the streets and houses behind and beside me. Had I the skill, such paintings might show something of my feelings about Mykonos, "express" those feelings, but only by distorting appearance. My images of Mykonos are colored shapes.

We have not yet done with Mykonos and its use.

I went to Mykonos only to see; my images of Mykonos serve the single purpose of the memory of vision. But very little of life outside the world of the tourist is given to the single experience of vision; we act, work, love, worship. The image is involved in that world as well, still as record and memory and contemplation but also as way of coping with meaning and purpose, with something more nearly like the wholeness of experience. For instance:

The idea of an image as a window originated in Renaissance Italy and has been present in the understanding of Westerners ever since. It is an unusual idea in the use of imagery. More common is the image made famous by E.H. Gombrich, the hobby horse. For the child, resemblance plays very little part in the making of the hobby horse (it is adults rather than children who want realistic dolls). A stick that can be held in the hand and straddled is sufficient as a substitute for a real horse. The only thing necessary is that degree of functional relation and that it be manageable. The child cannot manage a real horse but can the pretend horse.

The stick as hobby horse is a true image. It is a representation but not (as the word usually implies) a representation of appearance. It is a representation of function and relation. It might be called, as Gombrich does, a substitute but only if the word "substitute" is not understood as

something inferior. The hobby horse is not an inferior horse; for the child, it is the horse. Were it an accurate representation of appearance, if it "looked like" the horse, it would lose the capacity for that function.

Many years ago, we were going through a museum and arrived at Brancusi's "Bird in Space", a famous piece of modern, "abstract" art. It is a tall, elegantly and gracefully curved, ovoid form of polished brass, nothing more. One of our daughters ran over, read the label, and started to laugh. I said to her, "Wait a moment. Think what it would look like if he had shown the appearance of the bird. It would sit there, showing feathers and beak and claws, just a lump of brass. This is the bird in space. He's showing you the flight of the bird!" With the singular capacity of a child, her face reacted with delight.

But Brancusi has not distinguished between an eagle and a dove, which is useful to know.

In other contexts, a passport or driver's license, the reproduction of appearance is the necessary function. It is a mistake to oppose "appearance" to "reality"; appearances, too, are part of the real.

There are realities of personality that survive alteration of appearance. Equally, the personality can alter with no change of appearance. Representation is not responsible only to appearance or to function.

The power of representation of appearance is suggested by the strange place of illusionistic art in the imagination. Wax works have an entrancing touch of the macabre about them, an almost numinous fascination. The contemporary sculptor, Duane Hanson, using the resources of modern technology, has carried the principle of the wax works beyond entertainment into the major arts. The amazing, the uncanny, the slightly frightening, appeal of all such figures is that of the painted corpse displayed in the coffin. That which was alive or might be alive is dead and yet retains the appearance of a living form. The illusion is astonishing and never complete; there is an inescapable dialogue between life and death.

The only nearly complete illusion I know of is some of the more expensive plastic flowers. The illusion is so accurate that sometimes only touch can tell the difference. So the plastic flower is not a part of the experience of the uncanny, the dialogue between life and death. It is simply a lie. It has all the appearance of the true flower, except everything that reminds us of its true nature, the changing, the transitory.

The only way to deny death is to deny life. Flowers are beautiful because they die.

The photograph is a different matter. It reproduces certain appearances with great precision but, by its difference of scale, is more a memory of the thing than an illusion. Hence women often have a corner of their house devoted to photographs of their family.<sup>2</sup>

Photographs are a type of the image as the abstraction of reality from time, with its use and its loss. Illusion is the extreme case and few images go so far, even in the sometimes entranced concern for appearances. There is so much more to true experience than appearances, indeed so much more in appearance than illusion. Something, not always appearance, is abstracted from the process of time and held before the mind for contemplation, used by the mind for contemplation.

The image makes the distant present and the un-manageable manageable. It can represent the appearance or the function or some interaction of the two or some other aspect of reality that is not appearance or function. It is not, is never, never can be, merely a record of an immediate experience, the prolongation of a moment. Pressed too far, this becomes sentimental. It is never correct to say "art is" or "art does", since the idea of "art" is a construction in our own minds for some one or another of our purposes that are often not at all agreeable to the original work. Art works, which are what we have of "art", are as varied as human beings are, great or squalid, true or false, honest or dishonest, competent or incompetent. Most art works, like most of us, are some combination of human virtues and vices. True or false, they all represent some attempt to transcend time. Our task is to determine what purpose they may have in thus denying one of the essentials of experience.

....all time is always now.  
T.S. Eliot

The art work, the embodied, em-mattered image, lifts immediacies out of the flow of time, thereby suspending time into memory and contemplation.

The present is the moment between past and future. It is not a moment without dimensions; it is prolonged or contracted in the immediacy of events. For the animal, the present is all there is. Its memory is learned responses and associations, not the holding of the past in consciousness for contemplation and use. Having no true memory, it cannot

<sup>2</sup> Among those I know it is always the women who establish such a household shrine. I do not know if that is always true.

have hope. Having no hope, it cannot plan; its purpose is solely to be what it is. It will die but does not know that it will die. It can have fear but its fear is the immediacy of a threat, not the general dread of our inescapable knowledge that we are going to die. Animals have intelligence, animals can love, and both can be carried out over time. Neither is available to them for contemplation, for thought.

We live between memory and hope. Memory gives meaning. Hope gives purpose. To destroy either is to destroy the human.

The process of time cannot be stopped. The image can abstract some moment of that process to hold in suspension for contemplation. What does that do to history?

What is "history"? The events of the past? The relics of the event? The reconstruction we make of the events?

The past is gone, irrevocably. All that remains are its artifacts, some of which are documents from or about the past. With these artifacts, we use our rhetorical devices to construct an image of the past. All images are responsible to the integrity of the material they work with. Since the artifacts were made by people like ourselves, they are entitled to the courtesy of careful attention; we cannot deal arbitrarily with the things they made for their purposes. Whatever the intrusion of our own processes, it is their world we try to see.

At the same time, the artifacts are part of our world. The time suspended is held in trust by us, for us. To turn them into evidence only is to deny their force and insights. They are present now, with us, not set apart as though they no longer matter except as we use them for our own purposes. The ancient Egyptian, the modern Navaho, are not something other than ourselves to be observed from a physical or intellectual distance. They are people like ourselves, living in their own situation, coping. What they do, what they make, can be, if we have the honor and the courage, parts of ourselves to enlighten and enliven our own coping.

What use do we make of the suspension of time?