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I'm hearing images, I'm seeing songs

In 1994 the photographer Robert Bergman took a portrait of a young woman, he left the photo untitled. (Fig. #1) The years preceding that portrait he did the same and the years after too. Bergman continued to make portraits, leaving each untitled. Each photo, void of name, void of caption, void of identity of subject, void of any record of where the photo was taken, is only labeled with the year the photo was made. Bergman's portraits are honest in their removal of identity and are honest in their abstraction. Each photo, much like the one in figure #1, is tightly cropped, the background is removed, and all the viewer is left with is an isolated, life like photo of a person, out of the context of place. All the viewer is left with is the photo at hand, the photo before, and the photo after. Each photo Bergman takes, assembled into books, becomes a part of a whole. A collection of portraits, all untitled, all abstracted, together create something new. "I'm an artist," Bergman assures us. "I'm not a social scientist. I'm not a do-gooder. I'm not a documentarian. I'm not a journalist." <sup>1</sup> Bergman, like all artists, is in the business of discovery.

A common and just understanding of Art suggests that a work of Art contains and communicates emotional and theoretical content from the artist. That the artist infuses meaning from within, into an external form. Although this claim has been heavily debated but often defended in the writings of philosophers such as Leo Tolstoy, Eduard Hanslick and others, one common thread ties all the opposing perspectives together -

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<sup>1</sup> O'Neill, Claire. "Robert Bergman, Emerging From The Darkroom." *NPR*, NPR, 10 Nov. 2009, [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120283879](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120283879).

that is, the perspective in time in which the viewer views, digests, and understands a work of Art. Although ever present, the role of time is oddly absent in this debate. For Tolstoy and Hanslick, on opposing sides of the debate, Art, for both, is read and discussed in terms of the past - either Art contains internal content from the artist that is present in the production of and in the resulting artwork, or the forms themselves convey emotional content inherent to them, that the artist composed through a process of discovery and reflection. Robert Bergman himself notes, “I’ve learned in life that waiting pays.”<sup>2</sup>

Following in the footsteps *of* and developing *on* the writing of Eduard Hanslick and his claim that form itself contains content, Hanslick’s works suggests something much more: that because form contains content, form can suggest a pathway towards understanding the future, and not just the past.<sup>3</sup> Reflection on a work or body of work is an enlightening pathway to the future. The mere idea that emotional, theoretical, and intellectual content is the sole defining factor in a work of Art ignores a major force of Art that we all know to be true - that because of Art’s lasting impact, Art can inform our understanding of the future, and in the future and not just inform us of the intent of the artist in the past. Photography specifically, through its inherent relationship with time, and it’s own unique past with it’s “documentary” nature, proves itself to be a powerful and insightful case study for this very idea, and the work of Robert Bergman lends itself to the discussion in manifest ways.

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<sup>2</sup> IBid

<sup>3</sup> Hanslick, Eduard. “A Musical Theory of Sound and Motion: From on the Musically Beautiful.” *Aesthetics: a Critical Anthology*, by George Dickie, St. Martin's Press, 1989.

Photography, a tool for documenting and recording, made possible by the literal and metaphorical flattening of space and time, is a mechanism of archive. With the artistic intention of archive or not, Photography cannot escape the bounds of the physical properties of the medium itself - light and space. Through the capturing and creating of an image, through the physical transference of light to chemical reactions or light to digital data, may it be a spontaneous or staged work, Photography is a record of a moment in time, and moreover, of the thoughts, feelings, and events that led to the image's production. Although Photography cannot escape its fundamental connection to the past, rooted in the very production of the image, it is *through* the production of an image, *through* the flattening of time, that a photograph becomes a pathway to the future.

This idea is reminiscent of, and intertwined with, the theories put forward in the piece "*Expressiveness in Music: The Composer's Voice*" by Edward Cone. In the piece, Cone writes that:

The medium of musical utterance, like that of speech, consists of purposefully organized sounds, produced or producible by actual performers... Instrumental music, whether alone or accompanying the voice, goes one step further in direction of abstraction from the word and constitutes a form of purely symbolic utterance.

Here Cone starts with the equation of music and the workings of language, suggesting that musical forms, like sentences, contain an already present and predeterminate meaning. He however dilates this point, by suggesting that musical form's abstract

nature, derived from its physical sonic qualities, suggest something beyond language, which consists of forms with predetermined meanings. It must be noted that his subsequent point does not cancel out his first, in that music does work as language does, as music and language both carry and convey their meaning through a composition of forms, but music goes further since musical forms are abstract in nature. A note is just a certain frequency played in the context of music. A note played alone however does not carry any specific meaning, it is just a frequency, abstracted. However when played in the context of other notes, or played in sequence with an action, an event or any such thing, like a fire alarm sounding when there is smoke, the meaning of the note is brought to light. Each note is malleable while at the same time containing inherent meaning only when in a context.

Robert Bergman's untitled portraits function much the same. Like frequencies, each portrait alone is abstract and difficult to decipher, but the portraits when placed together, become the notes of a Composition. For Robert Bergman, just like Edward Cone, composition is everything. It is at the very heart of content.

The line that must be crossed for the abstract to transfer into the world of meaning and content, is best understood through the difference between music and language. The difference is that "[music] has no content that can be paraphrased in other music, or in words, or any other medium," whereas a poem, a piece of theatre, or other works of the like, can be translated in a number of different mediums.<sup>4</sup> They can be paraphrased. Robert Bergman's decision not to include information with his photos

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<sup>4</sup>Cone, Edward. "Expressiveness in Music: The Composer's Voice." *Aesthetics: a Critical Anthology*, by George Dickie, St. Martin's Press, 1989. Pg. 606

follows this line of thinking, letting the photos stand for themselves; he trusts that they will convey content that cannot be otherwise explained. He notes, "I don't want you to have any escape from simply reacting to the Art." <sup>5</sup> Bergman here, forces the viewer to engage in the form of the work itself, rejecting the notion that the visual can be paraphrased like the literary. Bergman is also associating the visual and the musical, by accepting the notion that the photo's content is brought into relief by the other images or context, and not by an accompanying text. A word carries a definition, a note does not, an individual photo does not. Edward Cone writes, "Like a sigh, a musical gesture has no specific referent, it conveys no specific message. But like a sigh, it can prove appropriate to many occasions, it can fit into many contexts, which in return can explain its significance... No context, no content." <sup>6</sup> Here, Cone brings back into relief the concept of education, and the idea of learning through process. As an artist works, they are learning from the forms. A small shift in where the term "makes" or "creates" is used illustrates this well. Instead of saying "an artist creates forms that convey meaning," say, "an artist creates relationships between forms, and that conveys meaning."

Cone's suggestion is powerful, but provocative. When applied to the Visual Arts, Cone's claim suggests that more agency is given to the form of a work of Art than to the artist. However his claim rather suggests a symbiotic relationship between Art and artist that is both cogent and puissant. Through an artist's process of composition, there is a discovery of meaning through form that enlightens one's perspective, and helps dictate

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<sup>5</sup>O'Neill, Claire. "Robert Bergman, Emerging From The Darkroom." *NPR*, NPR, 10 Nov. 2009, [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120283879](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120283879).

<sup>6</sup> Cone, Edward. "Expressiveness in Music: The Composer's Voice." *Aesthetics: a Critical Anthology*, by George Dickie, St. Martin's Press, 1989. Pg. 608

the next element of the composition. The 1981 ABBA song “I Let The Music Speak” says it best: “I'm hearing images, I'm seeing songs, No poet has ever painted... I let the music speak, leading me gently, Urging me like a lover, Leading me all the way, Into a place, Where beauty will defeat the darkest day...I take it to me and let it flow through me, Yes, I let the music speak, I let the music speak”<sup>7</sup> ABBA’s lyrics are reminiscent of Cone, as they personify the music itself, pronouncing the music’s agency. The music, as described, has its own force that dictates the author’s actions, “Leading” and “Urging” them. Time again plays an important role, as reflection on the work being created allows for new developments to build.

As well as being reminiscent of Cone’s writing, ABBA’s lyrics bring forward Charles Baudelaire’s concept of Correspondence. The 20th century poet Charles Baudelaire wrote about the senses and the Arts in his poem “Correspondences,” from his book, *Fleurs du Mal*. Baudelaire writes, “Like prolonged echoes mingling in the distance / In a deep and tenebrous unity, / Vast as the dark of night and as the light of day, / Perfumes, sounds, and colors correspond.” It is clear that ABBA’s song echoes Baudelaire’s thinking, but Baudelaire’s thoughts have a wider horizon. Though a composition of words, Baudelaire links our senses together as “perfumes, sounds, and colors correspond.” The artist listening to images and hearing colors, learning from their work. This relationship and bridging of the gaps between the senses suggests a more active sense of being, one that cannot be fixed in time or in singular modes of perception.

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<sup>7</sup> Andersson, Benny, Björn Ulvaeus, and Anne Sofie Von. Otter, writers. "I Let the Music Speak." Recorded 1981. In *I Let the Music Speak*. ABBA. Deutsche Grammophon, CD.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, in his book *The Birth of Tragedy* in his section on *Apollonian and the Dionysian Art* discusses the breaking down of the platonic separation of the perceived and the real, of “the two halves of our existence, the waking and the dreaming states.”<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche, like Baudelaire, wants to broaden the horizons of perception, rejecting any notion of a singular states of being or perceiving. Nietzsche claims that there is no barrier between waking and dreaming, but rather a portal between the two states. The real is accessible through the imagined, the abstracted, and the symbolic, and conversely the symbolic, the abstracted and the imagined all come from form itself.

The symbolist painter Eugène Carrière, part of the Symbolist movement of *la fin du siècle* in France, epitomized this way of thinking. In his 1893 “Self-Portrait,” (Fig. #2) he uses the mode of the self portrait to bridge the gap between that of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the real and the perceived, the objective and the subjective. Carrière’s painting blends the line between forms and colors, as if nothing is definite, but everything is recognizable, much like the photographs made by Bergman, and much like the lyrics of Abba’s song. The 20th century Art critic James Heneker writes, in his 1910 book, *Promenades of an Impressionist*, “his portraits have a metaphysical meaning - they are a *Becoming*, not a *Being*, tangible though they be. Their fluid rhythms lend to them almost the quality of perceptual rejuvenescence.”<sup>9</sup> Carrière’s use of blending, as well as his sculptural sense of volume in his paintings, works to create the sense of a

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<sup>8</sup> “Friedrich Nietzsche: Apollonian and Dionysian Art from the Birth of Tragedy.” *Aesthetics: a Critical Anthology*, by George Dickie, St. Martin's Press, 1989, p. 477.

<sup>9</sup> “Eugène Carrière.” *Promenades of an Impressionist*, by James Huneker, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910, p. 73.

moment in-between, of a state of transformation rather than a fixed state. Again, this is the portal between the work of dreaming and the world of waking of which Nietzsche writes. Heneker notes that this process goes beyond the physical painting but into the process of its construction, which is then in turn reflected in the paint on the canvas. In another piece of writing by Heneker, discussing Carrière's painting of another portrait, he notes that "it was painted at one *seance* of several hours, and the poet, it is said, did not sit still or keep silence for a moment."<sup>10</sup> Overtime, a state of movement and of being is recorded as a state of becoming - through the application of paint over time. This conjoining of time and painting allows reality to be viewed not as reality but as abstract paint on a canvas - an exercise of the freeplay of the imagination. Carrière's "Self-Portrait" is reverant and revealing because, as a result of the exercise of the free play of the imagination, Carrière was able to paint something that reveals more than it literally depicts.

Carrière's painting is thus perfect link back to the world of Photography, with which this essay is, ostensibly, primarily concerned. Just as Carrière's painting in a sense flattened time by removing the notion of a singular moment in time in a portrait, the photograph does the same. Now this is in many ways counterintuitive to common notions of what the photograph is, but the physical properties of it say different. Photography is the process of making a photo, which is the result of light hitting a photosensitive surface over a duration of time, however lengthy or brief. Part of the photographer's job when making an image is deciding for how long the photo will be

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid



exposed to light. A photo is inherently linked to time in its creation. As well, the root of the word “Photography” itself describes an inherent connection to process and time. Deriving from the ancient greek words *Phos*, which means light, and *Graphê*, which means drawing or writing, “Photography” means “Drawing or Writing with light.”<sup>11</sup> The root of the word, and the definition of it, both use the present tense, emphasizing the active and temporal nature of the production of a photograph. Much like the description of Carrière’s painting by Heneker, Photography exists in a state of becoming and not being. Note too that becoming is also in the present tense. Robert Bergman, in the creation of his photographs, allows for time to take a part in the process, as is revealed in the posture and comfortability present in his portraits. (Refer back to figure #1) Bergman’s portraits take time. Unlike other street photos which art about stealing a moment, and unlike the fast past, high production value studio portraits, Bergman’s photos toe the line between spontaneous freeplay (in his search for the right subjects) and meditative engagement (in the making of the image).

Photography, though its scrutinous detail, its unavoidable relationship with time, and its false promise of truth, acts like musical notes, and like words. A photo is like a chameleon, it means both nothing and everything, as it changes its skin and identity as it is put in conversation with other photos. Photos create their own context, informing their own content. A photographer, in essence, is asking a question of the form in front of which they place their camera. A photographer of course takes part in making an image, making decisions of subject matter, composition, lighting, color, post processing,

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<sup>11</sup> “Photography (n.)” *Index*, [www.etymonline.com/word/Photography#etymonline](http://www.etymonline.com/word/Photography#etymonline) v 35984.

etc... but in effect a photographer is composing a question, not an answer. The content of an image comes not in the form of the question asked but in the resulting image. The difference is in the content that lies *behind* the image and *in* the image. There is emotion and intellect that informs the asking of the question (the making of the image), but the image itself has its own content that acts as an answer to the question. Part of this has to do with the mimetic qualities of photography. A photograph, through the combination of a lens and a sheet of film/sensor, is able to see more than the human eye. It's ability to see more resides not only in its detailed recording of information, but in its manipulation of focus. The human eye's limited range of focus, combined with personal biases, limit how much information can be seen and digested, however the camera is able to overcome and subvert the limitations of the human eye through the image. An image thus contains content that the photographer didn't and couldn't consciously intend, that thus can still be revealing.

Returning to Edward Cone's idea that there is no content without context, his concept accentuates Photography's power, underscoring its revelatory qualities. Photographs, each revealing their inherent and hidden content, together bringing new aspects to the fore, helping the photographer and the viewer understand the world in a new manner. The photos create the context for how the viewer will next see the world around them.

It is true that photography is commonly used and appreciated throughout the world, to great success and advantage, for its documentary and simple aesthetic qualities and products. Perhaps this has made the form seem mediocre, limited,

exhausted, and even reductive. Robert Bergman's portraits, and likewise the work of numerous other photographers, is often critiqued and questioned for its motives. Calling it self-indulgent or self-aggrandizing in its portrayal of people, critics are concerned with the exploitative nature of portraits, its selection of subjects, its savior complex, and more. However Bergman, more explicitly than others, in the absence of captions, notes that his photos aren't about the past, or even about the person depicted, but are really about him. Photography's power to resolve the world in front of it is a blindingly powerful force. Photography itself toes the line between the world of Art and the world of document, and Photography can rightly be used for both. It is because of this wide and general appreciation of the practical uses of photography, that it is important to discuss and reflect on the forward thinking qualities of Photography, to be sure that we fully appreciate how this affects but effects the way we understand and view the world. This way we can, like Bergman, ask questions, and let the photos answer.

Figure #1 : "Untitled" - 1994



Figure #2: *"Self-Portrait"* - 1893

