
Then and Again

Can rephotography deepen critical visual skills in the classroom?

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Abstract

Rephotographs are pictures of a subject that repeat an existing image. Recent interest in this ‘rephotography’ has led to an emphasis upon rephotographs as artistic outcomes, but there is also a need to examine them within a process-oriented form of visual inquiry: *doing* rephotography is worth more than the rephotographs themselves. Part of an ongoing inquiry into the value of rephotography within education, this paper presents rephotographic activities carried out with undergraduate liberal arts students in Japan. Discussing the work of three students, initial conclusions follow that rephotography could have a profound impact upon creative education in non-specialist Japanese universities if student interest is maintained.

Keywords: rephotography, critical visual skills, Japanese education

1 What is Rephotography?

Rephotographs are “one or more pictures of the same subject which are made to repeat an existing image” [1] but a history of rephotography is almost a history of photography itself. During the early 19th century when a number of people laid claim to photography as *their* invention, it was arguably necessary to repeat a subject because it provided fair means in which to evaluate the results. For example, Henry Fox Talbot reportedly took six (albeit compositionally different) photographs of his window at Lacock Abbey between 1835 and 1839 [2]. Later on in 1888 Sebastian Finsterwalder first formally made annual exposures from a camera station in the Tyrolean Alps for the purpose of measuring change in a glacier’s movement [3]. While repeated photographs have since become common in earth sciences for visualizing change, it was the work of photographers Mark Klett and collaborators in the 2000s that focused attention on the process of rephotography as being where a conversation about a place over time can occur [4]. Since then, the popularization of digital cameras has led to a variety of amateur attempts to match the past with the present, but while such projects arguably get people looking at their surroundings, a concern is that this engagement is short-lived, and results in a novel aesthetic [5]. This paper recognizes that more useful information can be gleaned from rephotography if participants are encouraged to critically reflect upon previously made images as part of a broader visual inquiry. Further, it asks whether rephotography can be used to deepen critical visual skills over a sustained period of time (e.g. a semester).

2 Rephotography in the classroom

Despite acknowledgement of its value as a visual methodology [6], rephotography in education is generally tacit with results most often presented in exhibition format rather

than evaluated in terms of process/impact. Building upon studies into the use of rephotography for informal learners [7] and its application in visual communication education [8], this paper discusses projects produced by undergraduate liberal arts students (Junior and Senior grade) of the Faculty of Global and Interdisciplinary Studies at Hosei University in one semester for a class titled *Photography and Culture*. Here, students were challenged to visually explore Tokyo as a dense nucleus of inter-relations and perspectives, and to explore time in relation to individual and collective experience. Thus, the class objectives were to produce and submit a final series of seven photographs, a short video presentation summarizing their project and a reflection-journal that evidenced their exploration. While students were not explicitly asked to carry out rephotography projects, the 15-week syllabus consisted of *a.* an on-site rephotography challenge, *b.* introductory lectures to three typical forms of rephotographic practice—repeat photography (rigorous repetition of the same subject matter over time), rephotography (looser revisiting of an image of a place) and re-enactment (re-making of a moment)—and *c.* a range of teaching strategies typical of creative arts education including peer review of work-in-progress, interview questionnaires, and one-to-one formative feedback from the instructor. Of the 31 students, all had little or no background in art education, although a few had noted previously taking another arts-related course in the program (e.g. Art History, or Documentary Photography). All students reported owning a smartphone device with a camera application to record people and places, and a few reported having digital Single Lens Reflex cameras (SLRs) for a hobby, but most students demonstrated little technical knowledge of how cameras work (e.g. aperture, shutter speed, white balance).



Figure 1 A rephotograph by student H (right) of a photograph taken by the instructor on campus (left).

3 Responses

Submissions by three students revealed an interesting range of responses. Student H initially described a long-standing interest in advertisements, magazines and group thinking. Highly articulate, her collaboratively produced rephotograph of an elevator sign for the on-site rephotographic challenge was a near-exact match of the original image (Figure 1), reminding her that it was important to look and consider what the original photographer may have been doing to make the photograph (e.g. leaning on a handrail). In then producing a series of photographs of a river taken while looking through a blue plastic water-bottle (anthropomorphized as her 'partner'), she expressed an intention to share a different view with others. Although unable to convey a sense of time (all the photographs being the same shade of blue), she further noted the difficulty of taking a photograph exactly as seen even by her own eye, particularly the difficulty of replicating height, angle and lighting. Similarly, student J expressed interest in visual practices (stop-frame animation), but added a personal practical need (making photographs of friends for a graduation gift). Although less articulate, he had found the correct place in the on-site rephotographic challenge, but had not noticed differences created by 'zooming' into the subject (e.g. increase in *bokeh*). This was in contrast with his series of photographs depicting pairs of insoles in public places, where there appeared to be a conscious and deliberate decision to avoid 'zooming'. In addition, a stated intention to show evidence that he was standing in those places without being in the frame resonated with his own understanding of photography. Being less articulate, student S had expressed enjoyment in photographing random things as a reflection of her emotions or mood. Having an additional interest in sociology, her proposal for a series of photographs aiming to depict events commodifying other cultures held promise. While she had found the exact location in the on-site rephotographic challenge, subtle differences between images were easily overlooked; an observation that was unfortunately seen again in her final photographs of a Vietnamese culture festival in Tokyo, thereby suggesting a lack of consideration or interest.

4 Further discussion

Rephotography is a way to have a conversation about a place over time but its usefulness to students is difficult to gauge. While 15 out of 31 submissions contained explicit visual references to the teaching of rephotography (e.g. elapsed time,

repetition, juxtaposition, older images), examining these alongside students' initially expressed understanding of photography was more insightful. For H, the class was a formal opportunity in which to express her creativity. For J, the class was a practical task which he approached systematically. And for S, the class was an opportunity to learn how to take effective photographs and express how she saw the world. Rephotography sharpened existing critical skills for H and J, but failed to deepen the same skills within S. From this small sample, rephotography can arguably create opportunities to think critically about making/using images, but more studies are needed to encourage rephotographic strategies to incorporate other factors that may influence the students (subject fatigue, motivation, other demands on time, etc.). With such considerations, the impact of rephotography upon students in Japanese universities without specialist creative education programmes is potentially profound.

References

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