

Image fatigue

In a culture saturated with visual images and increasingly cynical about their manipulation, photography is losing its status as an art form, writes **Sebastian Smee**

29apr06

PHOTOGRAPHY as an art form is on the wane. There may be more photographers having their work shown in galleries, books, magazines and on the web than ever, but something inherent in the medium - something people have spent 1 1/2 centuries being beguiled by - is losing its grip on the public imagination.

Photography has finally become just another way of making images. So easy is it to produce these images that our culture has reached saturation point. Just think of all the wedding photos, baby photos, holiday snaps, news photos, fashion shots, forays into art, scientific photos, police records, studio portraits, passport photos and party snaps that come into existence every day of the year, all across the globe.

Very simply, one can't keep up. There is barely enough time to look more than once at one's own, supposedly precious photographs, let alone photographs by those who may have something extraordinary to show us.

But the reason for photography's eclipse as an art form has not just to do with the astonishing superabundance of photographs; it has to do with dramatic recent changes to the medium. Thanks to the digital revolution, there is virtually nothing that can't be done to a photograph to alter its once unique relationship to reality.

There is much to amaze in what is suddenly possible but the amazement is largely technical. In terms of art, something profound has been lost. People sense it. Art-loving audiences are fast losing interest in the medium.

After the heyday of only a few years ago, when photography seemed everywhere and Australia's most internationally acclaimed artists (Tracey Moffatt, Bill Henson, Patricia Piccinini and Rosemary Laing) were all working in it, museums are becoming increasingly reluctant to pin much hope on photography's capacity to keep people enthralled. Apart from the Henson retrospective in Sydney and Melbourne in 2004-05, no great photography exhibitions have been mounted in Australia's main public galleries in years. Overseas, it's much the same story.

The bubble of fascination in the so-called Dusseldorf school of photographers (Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth and their teachers Bernd and Hilla Becher), which helped their photographs fetch staggering prices at auction just a few years ago, has burst.

Plenty of photographs appear in survey shows of contemporary art. But for the most part, that the medium is photography is incidental. All the strange idiosyncrasies that once made photography so beguiling are breezily ignored by most of today's photographic artists (as they are called). Instead, the camera is used as a device simply to record or illustrate something else (be it an idea, a fantasy or a thin slice of reality).

So photography's hard-won victory - its gradual acceptance as an art form during the course of more than a century - turns out to have been a pyrrhic one. The medium's special aptitudes, described but never quite pinned down by astute practitioners and critics in 150 years, no longer seem quite so special. Instead, photography has become ubiquitous, frictionless and trivial.

The arguments about whether photography deserves to qualify as an art form may seem redundant today, but they once were complex and gnarly and never quite conclusive. Why? Because the various possible answers to the question "What makes a great

photograph?" never stood in a straightforward relationship to the question "How much artistry is involved in taking a great photograph?"

This strange state of affairs is the source of almost everything interesting one can find to say about the medium. The camera, after all, is a mechanical tool and, despite its modern ubiquity, it remains a rather miraculous one. So it is not surprising that, in the decades following its invention, the question asked was: "What should we do with this thing to get the most interesting results?"

One of the most common answers had nothing to do with art. It was a conviction that photography's great purpose was to record historical truth. Thus the documentary, or realist, strain of photography has always been strong. In recent years, it has enjoyed something of a revival in the art world, which occasionally grows ashamed of its navel-gazing tendencies and looks to photography to reconnect it with the outside world.

But in terms of the culture at large it is a faux revival. In truth, the status of documentary photography, or photojournalism, has been slowly draining away since its golden era in the 1970s. Fewer magazines and newspapers even bother to publish serious photojournalism any more. There are a variety of reasons for this, from compassion fatigue and competition from moving imagery on television and film to perceived inadequacies in the nature of the documentary photograph.

To compensate, some of the best photojournalism has shifted sideways into a cultural arena it previously spurned: the art world. Great documentary photographers such as the Brazilian Sebastiao Salgado profess thoroughgoing disdain for the art world. But they want an audience for their work and in galleries and art museums they get it.

Sadly, this awkward new context has only added to the insecurities of the great photojournalists. Displayed in art galleries, their work tends to meet with popular, but rarely critical, success. Their claims to represent objective truth inflected with moral urgency have been thrown into doubt by critics and philosophers of the image. Salgado, for instance, has been repeatedly accused of falsifying and even betraying his subjects by making images of trauma and destruction too artful, too beautiful.

It is painful for those photographers who care deeply about their subjects, risk their lives in the course of doing their job and consider themselves genuine political activists.

As Salgado tells me: "People in the affluent West become very defensive and think you are doing what you do for yourself, your own prestige. But the critic has not seen what I have seen, he has not been to the places I have been, he has never planted a tree. The critic is there, I am here." The critics Salgado refers to have argued that, by snatching a single moment from the flow of time, photographs hollow out and falsify reality. Context, they argue, is everything and when you lose it you can't help but distort the reality of any given situation.

Photojournalists go to great lengths to counter this proposition. Some, such as Salgado or Australia's talented Trent Parke, contextualise their photographs with overriding narratives or long, written descriptions. The best use all the artistry at their disposal to wring out meanings from their images.

One of the great models for wringing out such meanings is Henri Cartier-Bresson's celebrated notion of "the decisive moment", an attempt, as critic Peter Schjeldahl once put it in a marvellous essay on Henson, to capture the moment "the past, as blind preparation, pivots and becomes the future, as all-seeing consequence". Despite Cartier-Bresson's extraordinary success, it wasn't long before people started to see something artificial about the doctrine of the decisive moment. It was, after all, a literary notion imported from the dramatic arts. Life wasn't like that, some objected; it had no decisive moments. Or at least, when it did, it was decisive for reasons far deeper than a photograph could convey.

At which point along came Robert Frank, whose great book, *The Americans*, showed images congested with unknowns, with a sense that something was about to happen or had just happened, but one couldn't be sure which (or even what). Rather than the decisive moment, Frank showed the moments on either side of it. The effect, as Schjeldahl observed, was trippingly poetic, sorrowing and, excruciatingly just short of fulfilment. (An exhibition starring Frank opens at Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria on May 20.)

Those modernists who wanted photography to be true not just to life but to its own mechanical nature also found something satisfying in Frank's approach. Uniquely, they realised, the random, artless snapshot could show us visual facts as our eyes never saw them, since our brains were forever editing the constant flow of information provided by our eyes and making it conform to our expectations. Snapshots could operate as a sort of optical unconscious, showing the surrealism that lurked in everyday reality.

(In even the most mundane snapshot, for instance, it is always disconcerting to see the child in the background one wasn't aware of, the ugly electrical leads in the living room or the micro-expression of irritation on a loved one's face.)

"There is nothing as mysterious as a fact clearly described," says Garry Winogrand, a master of this new style. "I photograph to see what something will look like photographed."

According to this way of seeing, it turned out that not all that much artistry did need to be involved in the making of a great photograph. It was in the nature of the medium to be interesting, if we would just let it.

A certain eye could be brought to the process of selection, certainly, but even there the random and the arbitrary could be just as fertile ground as the carefully composed, the congested with meaning. But of course, the mind easily tires of randomness.

Wolfgang Tillmans, a contemporary practitioner of this snapshot style, summed up his general approach when he called his 2003 retrospective in London *If One Thing Matters, Everything Matters*. It's a philosophy that sounds attractive enough until you realise that it quietly contradicts some of our most fundamental assumptions about art.

What is art, after all, but a dream of significance, of some things mattering more than others, a concentration and distillation of the great, formless everything that surrounds us into something more meaningful?

In the end, photographers such as Tillmans convert realism into arbitrariness, life into triviality. The initial interest inevitably palls and the faint underlay of surrealism becomes a glaze of banality.

So photography today has been thrown back on itself and the question of what it must do to retain interest as art is once again freshly alive. The problem is that, thanks to the digital revolution, the frisson of excitement that used to accompany photographs (the knowledge that the image was evidence for something real, a trace of something that happened) is slowly disappearing. It's not as if photographers haven't been involved in fabrications and manipulations since the outset. The early days of the medium were full of trickery and theatre, cases of day being turned into night just to suit the photographer's purposes. But today the whole context has shifted: the layers of artifice seem unending and the thread connecting photography to the real has been snapped.

Or not quite. There are photographers who are still making great art. Henson is one of them; so are American Sally Mann and New York-based British photographer Adam Fuss. What they seem to have in common is an acute sensitivity to the medium's inherent aptitudes, its original, fragile relation to reality.

The liberties they take can be breathtaking: artificial staging, deliberate obscuring and ghostly distortion of the image. But somehow (primarily by resisting the siren call of digital manipulation) they manage to hang on to photography's precarious connection to reality. They make something heartbreaking of the tension between a photograph's physical presence and the unrecoverable past of which it is a trace.