

nicola loder

www.nicolaloder.com.au

tourist #3
sighted child 1 - 11

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These portraits of children seem pretty close to the portraits of blind children which Loder showed in 2006; similar distortions, similar saturated exaggerated colour, similar Moire patterns and Gaussian blurring. In 2006 these kind of pictorial effects seemed to me like trace-effects from the failure of vision; an obvious identification with the blind subject. But since these kids can see, the same effects might suggest an alternative form of visuality, in between seeing and blindness, or just next to it, within adjacent fields of sensory experience, that might be as germane to people who can see as people who can't.

Certainly, in Loder's work veracity fails. And just as Photoshop is typically intended to improve clarity and focus as easily clickable options, it can also - by virtue of the same algorithm - be set in reverse to model the collapse of verisimilitude. Indeed, at Loder's disposal, it figures the deterioration, the dramatic breakdown, of appearances, like the onset of blindness or some malady of the senses.

And yet Photoshop is not actually optical, just uses optics as a metaphor. The material transformation of a photograph into a digital image - from light and photochemical emulsion to code and pixels - is a fundamental, substantive shift, where an original, ephemeral ray of reflected light acquires a new, virtual plasticity, "sort of like making the image into clay and pulling and pushing until you get the desired result" says Loder. Each face is rendered within a new topography, the space of a computer, 'a virtual terrain'.

Indeed, we immediately sense this excessive visuality in Loder's images in the exaggerated line and colour, the high contrast topography and the multiple layers. Visuality doesn't so much breakdown by reduction or through attrition, as it overloads in a kind of feedback; clicking the mouse until it can be clicked no more, reaching the end of the math, the algorithm spent, the child's face barely legible, technical effect pouring out of the eyes, nose and mouth. Here there is too much visuality, overflowing similitude, exceeding good taste, beyond all propriety.

While the images tend toward formlessness, and the faces teeter on the brink of recognition, the process stops just short of our incomprehension. At this remove, where the image has become bits, it could indeed be as easily reformulated or reformatted in other media. Digitisation enables this extraordinary reconstitution which might then portend another sense or even a kind of synaesthesia, wherein seeing abuts and meshes with the other senses. From here I can sense these images as a sound or object, even smell them, almost as easily as I can see them.

New visioning technologies like vOICe (v "Oh, I see!" e) are predicated on the same transformation, converting visual data into sound as a visual aid for blind people. Scenes are scanned by cameras in stereo and converted into soundscapes replayed through headphones; bright things are louder, pitch tells you what's up and what's down, you hear objects either on your left or right. Proficient users report ghostly mental images, and their brain activity compares to that of sighted people while actually looking at something. This synthetic synaesthesia interrelates the senses in what Meijer describes as "crossmodal integration" or "seeing with your ears".

Lodro Rigdzin is a blind photographer who uses vOICe attached to his rangefinder camera. "I can really hear space" he says. "I listen for patterns that sound good [and] I construct an image from sound." But other senses are engaged too. "Just as often, I'll hit on something with my cane, seems interesting, and I feel around for it with my cane, and I want to catch it. I hold the camera and I know the lens is going to touch somewhere or something or someone. And it always does. Touching is seeing, in a way. Holding the camera in my hands is seeing, in a way."

So too the first visual sensations of the congenitally blind restored to sight seem to emerge from an undifferentiated realm of sensory experience. Psychologist Mesmer Von Senden records that “newly operated patients do not localise their visual impressions; they do not relate them to any point”, and “they see colours much as we smell an odour of peat or varnish, which enfolds and intrudes upon us, but without occupying any specific form of extension”. Further, there are no objects, no spatial dimensions, no shape or distance, only variations of brightness, then the chaos of colour. Objects and depth only emerge later as vision is reconciled to other senses such as touch and hearing.

It's no surprise then that in teaching blind children photography Nicola describes herself becoming a “disembodied voice representing me no longer contained/restrained by physical attributes, facial expressions or physical gestures”, but “sort of floating and essentialised in some way, like I was becoming invisible and more visible simultaneously”. The shapelessness or formlessness no doubt reflects the absence of anything which is self-evident according to discrete senses (ie. see there!, or hear that!) especially with children who have fewer words to fill that gap - the absence of one sense seems to increasingly interrelate the others.

Is this why Loder retains the semblance of a face, the faces of these blind and sighted children, like the 8 blue poles amidst Jackson Pollock's chaotic spills and drips, a ghostly elemental figure within a disordered, deconstructed field? These faces recall the formative, structuring moments of visuality, the first thing we ever see, recalled unconsciously in dream states described by psychoanalyst Otto Isakower, “mental images of sucking at the mother's breast and of falling asleep there when satisfied”. At this original liminal threshold, visuality is recalled in combination with other senses, not as a discrete realm of experience but “a visual sensation of a large, doughy, shadowy mass, usually round, growing larger as it comes nearer and nearer ... accompanied by sensations of tactile roughness on the skin and inside the mouth, and a milky or salty taste in the back of the throat.” The face emerges as a visual percept from this overwhelming synaesthesia but the original experience is multi-faceted; a visual experience is commensurate with a taste, a sound, a texture.

We might think of Loder's work as 'undoing' visuality. She sets technology in reverse, working against the imperatives of photography to clarify, focus, refine and sharpen images, as if our eyes worked backwards, as if acuity worsened. The face is an obvious (originary) limit beyond which chaos prevails and other senses are engaged to interpret what looks like abstract static but which many now believe is an unstriated sensory realm, a liberated space of interrelated, undifferentiated holistic sensory experiences; the original synaesthesia from which perception emerges as a travesty according to 5 distinct categories.

So it's not blindness after all that the work references, not the failing of vision, but the first moments of looking, when 'seeing' begins to separate from the other senses and consolidates into a face, a percept, then into a code, a genre, a representation. Indeed, some (like the philosopher, theoretical neuroscientist, and Buddhist nun Christine A. Skarda) even say that representation distorts our true "organismic functioning", shatters or segments the continuum of sensory experience, which no doubts supports the desire among many (artists, photographers, blind people, Buddhists, TM practitioners, LSD freaks, experimental psychologists and psychoanalysts to name a few) to return to a more complete experience of the world.

stuart koop

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all works
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