

The point has been made by many people, including Susan Sontag, that the street photographer is a *flâneur* of sorts. Sontag has many criticisms about photography in her book *On Photography*. As she puts it,

A way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it – by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir. (Sontag 9)

I am thinking of people I know who like to photograph their food before they eat, or of parents who take photographs of their children while they are playing the piano at home or of their families in front of the Eiffel Tower. There is nothing wrong with doing these things (I do them myself all the time). But after a while, if we claim to be serious about photography as an art form and yet this is all we do with photography, then it no longer allows us to see anything new. It allows us to see only what we already see, putting us in a state of self-consuming and self-affirming narcissism, saying, “Look at me, look at me”.

Sontag’s views are thought-provoking:

Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks. [italics in original] (23)

What if we pursue photography with humility, as a way of looking at things differently? John Berger has made the point that “Every photograph presents us with two messages: a message concerning the event photographed and another concerning the shock of discontinuity” (*Another Way of Telling* 86). He goes on to say that “Between the moment recorded and the present moment of looking at the photograph, there is an abyss” (*Another Way of Telling* 87). While Sontag focuses on the moment of taking the photograph, Berger gets us thinking about the act of looking at a photograph. This abyss then, is what we are in right now and what we have been trying to cope with. The abyss is when the street photograph gives us something we find hard to accept. We look, and look again, and we struggle with the meaning of the scene.



Here, then, is the condition of street photography. It aspires to the condition of found poetry in its search for the readymade scene. It is not the street scene that waits for the arrival of the photographer, but the photographer who designates the street as such. Can one be persuaded that the scene in the above photograph is an everyday scene?

The photographic subject above is a tantalizing figure. One peruses the newspapers over breakfast at home or at a *cha chaan teng*. The newspaper reader, utterly at ease and reposed on an office chair on a street pavement, is declaring that he owns the streets. He refuses to obey the unspoken rules concerning public and private space, concerning what is or is not done on the streets of Hong Kong. Has anyone said it is wrong to be at ease, reading a newspaper like this in an office chair on a street pavement? The street photographer aspires to this pose of reading at leisure.

I am reminded also of Benedict Anderson's point concerning the relationship between the act of reading a newspaper and one's national consciousness. Anderson describes the act of reading a newspaper as a "mass ceremony":

[the newspaper reader is] well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. (35)