

Photography as an instrument of perception

ONE LAST ALL-EMCOMPASSING GLANCE and then it's «Bye-bye, lake! Bye-bye, wind! Bye-bye, garden!» That's how our five-year-old son Lennart takes his leave of our weekend cottage when Sunday evening comes around and it's time to drive back to our home in the city. The list may vary, but he never forgets it. Indeed, this repetition has become a ritual which helps to take the sorrow out of parting. By addressing each in turn, by name, Lennart seems to be reassuring himself about the specific characteristics of this country refuge, the environment with which he is in total harmony. Not only has the place become part and parcel of his life, but, by reason of the fact that it is not always available, our home in the country has also acquired a special meaning. His perception of the place is more intense, for it can never be taken for granted. Forever having to leave it behind, Lennart is constantly obliged to come to terms with it anew. Everything is familiar and strange at the same time. It's the feeling we all have when we return home from a long vacation and are able to see, hear, smell and feel familiar objects in a fresh way, discovering in them completely new and unexpected qualities. Photography, too, can convey such an experience. For me, one of the essential qualities of photography is its capacity to show us everyday life from an altogether different perspective. Indeed, it can be the very prerequisite for a broader perception of the world we live in. What characterizes the work of the Norwegian photographer Dag Alveng is not only this capacity to broaden our perception but also his ability to recognize the universal significance which just one small piece of reality can have for an individual.

Time and again, Alveng returns to the same house near the sea. There he photographs the building, its inhabitants and their guests, the path that leads down to the coast and, finally, the sea itself. But in just the same way as his landscape photographs are not purely topographical descriptions, Alveng's photographs of people are not conventional portraits. Various kinds of

photography converge in his images, and in a mixture which has a lasting effect on us, for they defy precise classification. They always have additional levels of meaning, but this quality is latent and only becomes visible on repeated viewings.

Dag Alveng uses an old 8 x 10 inch, large-format view camera. This enormous camera is roughly the size of a portable television set and cannot be used without a sturdy tripod. Since the individual sheets of film are loaded into unwieldy film holders the size of magazines, the number of photographs that can be taken at any one time is extremely limited. The reward for this rather difficult and involved method of taking photographs is a large-format negative which is packed with perfect detail. Contact prints made from these negatives, that is prints exactly the same size as the negatives, manifest the highest conceivable definition and precision. Indeed, the rendition of the subject is so compressed that enlargements have to be made from the negatives before we can fully read and appreciate their detail. When shown in exhibitions, the prints are enlarged to six times the size of the negatives. As a consequence, the prints no longer create a miniaturizing effect through their wealth of fine detail but, rather, operate as large-format photographs. We, the viewers, perceive the images in a completely different, physical way because of their size.

Photographs presented in this way have a strange attraction, making us look at them again and again, and more and more closely each time. We find ourselves constantly wanting to step back and view them in their entirety and then, no sooner have we changed our viewing position, we feel the inclination to step forward and examine them again for their detail. Indeed, these technically perfect black-and-white prints readily permit such detailed examination. Their color is the color of memory; our perception of their finely rendered gray tones anchors them – psychologically – in the past. The choice of black-and-white photography is one of the conceptual decisions made by the artist, for it has the immediate effect of abstracting reality. Color photography links the subject matter too much with the here and now. The absolute clarity of the black-and-white prints, their sheer brilliance, in other words, lends the photographed objects a certain plasticity, a kind of hyperreal presence. What makes these photographs endlessly fascinating is our awareness that there is more to discover in them than immediately meets the eye.

Unlike filmmakers or stage directors, photographers like Dag Alveng always work entirely alone, using the simplest possible equipment to come to terms artistically with the world and its reality. Their ability to engage the objects they photograph in a fruitful dialogue is central to their photography; it is the way they marry form and content. While their photographs are individual works in their own right, they are also meant to be viewed together, as series, for only then are they able to describe the complexity of reality or develop a theme in its many perspectives. The chief aim is not to afford the viewer a «That's just what it's like!» experience through this or that photograph but, rather, to provide as differentiated a view of the world as possible through the works as a whole.

Such photographs are often misconstrued to be documents. This is perfectly understandable, for the photographers do in fact use a documentary photographic style, that is to say, the pictorial language of their photographs resembles that of documentary photography and can indeed be read in the same way. First and foremost, however, these photographs must be understood as the product of the photographer's artistic self-expression in his endeavor to come to terms with reality. With this kind of photography, too, comprehensibility and credibility are the decisive criteria of appreciation, and yet when looking at them we are altogether aware of their subjectivity, no matter how straight forward they may seem to be. In other words, the photographer gives free rein to his own vision and, in so doing, departs from an objective rendering of the truth. The photographs evidence the difference between the photographer's perception and our perception of a world with which we are both familiar, and it is precisely this difference which makes the photographs interesting. In Alveng's case, too, it is the fact-based fiction of his photographs which distinguishes his work.

The scenery of Dag Alveng's photographs is not exotic. He works in his immediate environment – on the south coast of Norway and, like a diarist who writes with a view to having his diaries published, he narrates personal things, nothing private. Thus, his photographs are not in any way voyeuristic, but they tell a story which rings true. Like the best photographers, Alveng is able to extract from everyday life images capable of taking on a deeper meaning the longer we look at them. Consequently, Alveng's work may be seen as an attempt to broaden our perception of the

world through the medium of photography. Topographical descriptions, portrayals of human beings in specific situations, and the arrangement of these photographs in sequences – all united formally because of Alveng's own way of seeing things – form the backdrop for an ongoing observation of the world. Alveng does not just seek to get to the bottom of things photographically, but also endeavors, with analytical acuity, to reach beyond the limit of what we know or might suspect. The photographer looks at the place on our behalf, examining it as carefully as possible, attempting to comprehend it and its character as well as he can, and then, ultimately, captures in his photographs something which has never been known before, something which begins to dawn on us only as the images unfold. In this way, concrete objects become the means of an experience of self, a completely open-ended experience in which the photographer allows us to participate as equal partners.

By addressing the specific characteristics of the lakeside cottage by name, our son Lennart reassures himself about their continued existence. He does not as yet know what it is to lose a place which is – for him – so important, to retain only the after-image of its memory. In his photographs, which unify the time levels of the past, the present, and the future, Dag Alveng knows exactly what he is talking about: the importance of our family, of our friends, of the people who are close to us; the importance of a place whose value constantly has to be reappraised because it can never be taken for granted; the importance of the light of the summer sun in a country which is essentially cold and dark. Here, everything comes together for just a short time every year. Topography, autobiography, metaphor – these are the photographer's stylistic strategy. Dag Alveng's photographs deal with existential themes – and in order to comprehend them fully we need only to learn to perceive photography as an instrument of perception.

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