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'Contemporary photography, Metropolitan Museum, New York'

Ariella Budick

The Metropolitan Museum is an odd place to learn about the messiness of life. The orderly progression of galleries, the ever-vigilant security guard and the controlled lighting encase even the most uproarious displays in a civilizing shell, and exhibitions are supposed to fit into a consistent intellectual frame. That requirement bedevils *Between Here and There: Passages in Contemporary Photography*, which the curator Douglas Eklund has tried to organize around the theme of disorganization.

"Beginning in the mid-1960s the work of art started to break free from wall and pedestal," Eklund writes in the introductory text – a problem for an institution whose principal tools of display are walls and pedestals. Eklund tackles the paradox by lashing together two different ideas with ropes of twisted prose. The first is that artists have responded to what he calls the "spooky, comical vacuity of the modern world" by replacing traditional image-making with thought experiments. The second is that photographers mirrored the disorienting nature of contemporary life with portraits of uprooted people and scenes of dislocation.

The show's opening act covers the 1960s to the early 1980s, and its central work is Dennis Oppenheim's magnified shot of a mosquito sinking its stinger into a fleshy hand. A text elucidates: "The blood now conforms to the interior configuration of an insect, thereby placing part of you in a state of aerial displacement." Though it's large and dramatic, the image is really secondary to the idea Oppenheim injects into your consciousness with the precision of a mosquito's blade: that insectness and humanity mingle at the site of the bite.

This section explores objects that defy definition. On Kawara's "I Got Up", for instance, is a collection of store-bought postcards that he sent every day all through the 1970s, each one bearing a stamp with the date and time he rose from bed. Art doesn't just imitate life; it keeps a tally of life's minutiae.

Alternatively, art can record the experience of looking at art. In a 1969 performance, Vito Acconci sneaked on to a blackened stage and snapped photos of the waiting audience. The spectators, startled by the flash, became the subjects, and their expressions of surprise, distaste or indifference are mirrored on the faces of viewers at the Met, trying to decipher the piece's point. The Kawara and Acconci works aren't much to look at. Both men were less interested in photography than in pushing limits, and today the performance and the postcards generate more archival than aesthetic interest.

In Part 2 of "Passages", Eklund turns to a different argument entirely. Tired of toying with the rules of their calling, photographers once again took pictures to be framed and hung, only this time they hunted down real-life disruptions, some traumatic, some ordinary, but all of them somehow emblematic of the global Now.

Fazal Sheikh, who tracks displaced people around the world, uses his camera to tell uneasy truths. "Hadija and Her Father", a poignant evocation of parental tenderness, came about as a retort. In Kenya recording the Somalian refugee crisis, Sheikh had overheard a local doctor blame the Somalis' "essentially callous and aggressive nature" for their practice of smothering malnourished infants. Sheikh's rebuttal came in the form of this haunting picture of a father's touch on the shoulder of a young girl. It's not his face we see, but his hand, bolstering his daughter and trying to infuse her frail body with his strength.

Many photographs in this section have to do with rewriting the past. A young Bosnian asylum-seeker named Almerisa matures before the lens of Rineke Dijkstra. Over 14 years, the girl evolves from open-faced child to pinched adolescent, finally hardening into a leathery grown-up. Dijkstra observes how Almerisa moulds herself into a Dutch model of adulthood, gradually erasing all hints of her origins. A similar process takes place on the collective scale in China, where cities have cut down old buildings and sprouted new towers to accommodate migrating millions. Weng Fen relishes the brash shape of the new urban skyline as he mourns the vanishing present. His alter ego is a schoolgirl perched on a wall with her back to the camera, one leg still dangling above the weedy past, eyes fixed on the glass horizon.

If the exhibition's two halves — one focused on the radicals of the 1970s, the second on their earnestly globetrotting successors — add up to an interesting hodgepodge rather than a coherent argument, it is because Eklund's premise is excruciatingly vague. The curator's difficulties stem from the malaise afflicting many photography shows now that viewers are visually sophisticated yet totally overwhelmed. You can now find astounding photos everywhere from Flickr to Facebook. A couple of iPhone apps give the gizmo's users access to techniques once guarded by darkroom specialists. The verb "to Photoshop" appears in any up-to-date dictionary. New clichés spread before they get noticed.

This radically democratized context makes it difficult to distinguish professional art photography from the work of industrious amateurs. Curators are left trying to make the increasingly untenable argument that the most interesting photography is to be found on the very gallery walls that artists forsook a generation ago.

Eklund has a powerful ally in this debate: Thomas Struth, who is as fascinated by audiences as Acconci was but who sees them with a master's eye. The Met show hinges on his photo of "Liberty Leading the People", Delacroix's icon of Frenchness, uprooted from its home at the Louvre and exhibited at the Tokyo National Museum. The Gallic goddess, bare-breasted and indomitable, leads her compatriots' charge toward destiny; the Japanese museum-goers stand at a devotional remove. In a show about guerrilla art and rootless nomads, Struth offers the museum as a node where national identity, sanctity and theatre can contend, where art can cross the world and still find itself at home.

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