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HYPERALLERGIC
A SECOND LOOK AT TEJU COLE

By John Yau, August 7, 2017



I don't remember ever doing this before. After I finished my review of the exhibition, Teju Cole: Blind Spot and Black Paper, at Steven Kasher (June 15 – August 11, 2017), I felt compelled to write another one. It is not that I was dissatisfied more than usual with what I had written. Writers are always vexed by what they have written. In this case, something else about the works wouldn't leave me alone. The impetus came from pieces that I did and didn't write about. I decided to go back to the exhibition and look again. I wanted to figure out what I had not gotten to the first time, and which could not wait.

At the end of the text that he paired with his photograph, "Zurich" (October 2014), Cole wrote:

And I begin to worry that my search for information about these handguns and weapons of war would flag my activity as suspicious to the all-seeing eye of the government. What then is visible?

In an age of surveillance and sanctioned suspicion, Cole's question kept resurfacing in one form or another whenever my wife, Eve Aschheim, who had seen the show separately, and I talked about it — which we did more than once. If one wants to know what is visible, there is the lingering realization that something remains invisible.

The reason we kept circling Cole's question — and all that it implied — is because it stands in counterpoint to what we think about photographs: that they show us everything we need to see; all the information is there on the surface. In fact, this is what we prize about photographs. Like a "Wanted" poster in the local Post Office, they deliver something that needs to be seen and remembered. It is visual testimony, a form of witnessing. Is it necessary to see more than what Robert Frank shows us in his photograph, "Trolley — New Orleans" (1955) or what Diane Arbus does in "Identical Twins, Roselle, New Jersey" (1967)?

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This is one of the historical assumptions that we make about cameras. By possessing the mechanical capacity to record more than we can see with our eyes, we believe that the camera is able to produce an image that embraces everything we need to see. It is a truth-telling instrument, with the photographs offered as incontrovertible proof. The issue is appearances, which we wrongly believe are synonymous with some kind of truth.

The photograph that brought all these questions, thoughts, and hesitations into focus was another photograph titled “Zurich” (2014). It is of a store window full of globes sitting on shelves, shadows cast over many of them. It must be late in the afternoon, and Cole is standing on the sidewalk looking into the window. While one globe is reflected in the window, a ghostly presence near the middle of the top edge, there is no sign of the photographer. This is the text Cole includes with the photograph:

Kitchen to living room. Bedroom to bathroom. Downstairs to get the mail. House to subway. An evening stroll. You take around 7500 steps each day. If you live to eighty, inshallah, that comes to 200 million steps over the course of your life, a hundred thousand miles. You don’t consider yourself a great walker, but you will have circumnavigated the globe on foot four times over. Downstairs to get the mail. Basement for laundry. Living room to bedroom. Up in the middle of the night for a glass of water. Walking through the darkened house, you suddenly pause.

Cole does not tell us what made him pause or what thought he had at that moment. We are stopped, one might say, in midflight. Whatever conclusion we reach is ours. In the text, as in the photograph, he does not step back.

What am I looking at? I am looking at globes, one of which is topographical. While some look alike, they also look very different, which suggests that each representation is different. The shadows mimic the fact that part of the globe is always facing the sun, and the other part is always facing away. At best, we see only one side, the one facing us, but there is more, isn’t there? The deep shadow, which is the rest of the store, underscores the limitations of our sight, as well as that of the camera’s: It can only see so far. Its vision is stopped by the darkness.

The photograph only shows one side of the globe (or the world we inhabit), while the rest remains unknown and, in this view, unknowable. They are on the other side of the window and cannot be touched. This understanding of our limitation is further inflected by the fact that the globes are different, conveying the likelihood that an ideal representation is impossible. At best, we “will have circumnavigated the globe four times over” by the end of our life. How much of it will we have actually seen and comprehended? I think this sense of limitation, which Cole pushes back against because he is driven by wanderlust and curiosity, imbues the photograph with a state of hyperconsciousness. Is it impossible to see more? What is it that we see? There is the recognition that we do not see more, that the view we have is circumscribed by all sorts of factors that we must be aware of at all times.

The other thing about “Zurich” is the different kinds of time Cole gets into the work. There is the late afternoon light of the moment the photograph was taken. There is the globe and its evocation of the passage of day and night, and, to a lesser degree, of the seasons, and even epochs. Will the boundaries on the globe not change in our lifetime? Are they not changing, even now? There is Cole’s text, which is about chronological time and one’s lifetime. He has woven together different kinds of sequential time. The photograph is not everlasting; its beautifully registered moment does not exist in perpetuity.

By bringing together these different embodiments of time, as well as recognizing that a large part of the world he inhabits will always be facing in the other direction, Cole’s photographs recognize that limitation. How much do we, and the camera, actually see? Isn’t focusing on appearance a kind of lying if we do not acknowledge that there is more than what

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is on the surface? How are we to measure what we have seen? As “Zurich” conveys, mustn’t all our seeing be informed and supplemented by research?

Switzerland may be neutral and even peace loving, but Cole knows that the gun company Sig Sauer originated there. Cole’s photographs are sensitive to the brutal dying that is going on everywhere. He knows that looking is not innocent, and that it will never be. He does not show us the dead and dying — emaciated and tormented faces that we have seen repeatedly to the point that they have become a blur. He shows us something else — the emotional and physical distances we maintain from suffering as we blithely go through each day. It is called living.