

THE PROBLEM WITH EMOTION

MARC PELESSONE

On October 29, 2012, Superstorm Sandy hit the shores of New York and New Jersey. The East River overflowed. The lower half of Manhattan flooded. Seven subway lines became submerged. Boardwalks and coastal communities were destroyed. Many people still remain in need of assistance. It will be years before some of these communities are rebuilt. And global climate change and difficult economic times are causing us to question whether some communities should be rebuilt at all. Amid the debate and cleanup, the New York Photo Festival held an exhibit at The Powerhouse Arena in Brooklyn entitled “Sandy: Devastation, Document, and the Drive to Rebuild, Renew, Renovate, Refurbish, Regenerate, Replace, Refine, Redefine . . . Rebirth.” The Powerhouse Arena itself suffered damage from 28 inches of floodwaters during the superstorm. After repairs, Powerhouse displayed more than one thousand Sandy exhibit photos at or above the 28-inch floodwater line. Therefore, a visitor to this exhibit symbolically steps into the flood zone to view the flood. This placement adds another dimension of reality to the photos. It furthers the exhibit’s stated goal “to make sure the devastating visuals from the storm remain at the forefront of the public consciousness” (NYPF). But what is the real effect of these images? The pictures may evoke strong empathy for the victims, but simultaneously distract us from the larger issue of how best to address coastal lands and deal with the realities of global climate change. The pictures may even motivate us to take some sort of action. But will they guide us towards the best course of action?



Fig. 1. New York Photo Festival, “Sandy: Devastation, Document, Drive” at The Powerhouse Arena, 2013.

Compassion is a key component to how a society responds to any calamity. In the essay “Compassion and Terror,” Martha Nussbaum argues that compassion is the foundation upon which we build a civil society. She acknowledges the “role of tragic spectatorship, and tragic art generally, in promoting good citizenship” (Nussbaum 25).

Clearly, the New York Photo Festival, in devising their exhibit, understood the power of tragic spectatorship; the exhibit's photos of Breezy Point, Queens are particularly poignant. One photo shows an obviously middle-class neighborhood decimated. Several street blocks are visible where all that is left are the concrete foundations of what used to be rows of homes. In the background, several blocks away, are a few homes that remain standing. It appears arbitrary as to why these four homes still stand while the other houses on all the other blocks were washed away. This photo engages with its audience in much the same way that the great Athenian tragedies do; as Nussbaum explains, "they start with us 'fools' and the chance events that befall us" (25). We have an emotive response to this tragic art because we see ourselves as the possible fools whom the chance misfortune could befall. We might easily have been Sandy's victims ourselves.

Concern for our own misfortunes can now easily be extended into compassion for the real victims. When a viewer feels a connection to "the victims," he expands his sense of community to include those victims. Nussbaum articulates this point when she considers Euripides' play *The Trojan Women* written to elicit mercy from its Greek audience, explaining that "compassion required making the Trojans somehow familiar" (11). The New York and New Jersey landscapes in the Sandy exhibit's photos look nothing like the landscape of my home in San Diego. The density, the architecture, and the color palate share nothing in common with my own neighborhood. It is easy for me to see the Sandy devastation as foreign. In Southern California, our annual rainfall is less than twelve inches a year. Our biggest natural disasters are the Santa Ana winds which blow hot dry air through our canyons, setting them ablaze. It is fire, not water, that threatens me and my neighbors.

For some reason, I find myself most moved by these images. Why? Judith Butler offers an explanation. In her essay "Torture and the Ethics of Photography," Butler questions the effect "certain larger norms, themselves often racializing and civilizational, have on what is provisionally called 'reality'" (Butler 74). Butler's text suggests these photos connect with the norms of my reality; norms derived in large part by race and culture. Within the Breezy Point photos, there is a makeshift shrine erected to an obviously Christian saint. Two American flags hang on two of the now-empty foundations. These images do speak to my own "larger norms," specifically a Judeo-Christian ethic and a sense of national pride. Being that these are the "larger norms" of most Americans, the Sandy exhibit in general, and the Breezy Point photos in particular connect with the people of this nation. We are them. This exhibit expands our sense of community to include the victims of this tragedy. It is a key aspect in getting our country to step up and provide assistance. The exhibit's title, which characterizes it as the "drive to rebuild, renew, renovate, etc.," is intended to fuel that drive. And the exhibit succeeds in large part. The images expand our nation's sense of community with the hurricane victims. Our compassion inspires us to want to

contribute the aid necessary to provide the longer-term assistance some of the affected will need. And yet a more critical view of the exhibit reveals a more complicated truth.



Fig. 2. Rose Magno, “Breezy Point—After the Storm,” Breezy Point, Queens, 2012.

As viewers of photographs, we like to believe that the photo lens is presenting reality with some degree of precision and objectivity and thus the compassion it inspires in us is genuine and not coerced. But this is not always the case. Butler explores the darker side of photography—when photos become complicit in extracting a particular response from the viewer. Consider the current U.S. policy of embedded war reporting with regard to photography. Butler points out that “the visual perspective the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) permitted to the media actively structured our cognitive apprehension of the war” (Butler 66). The DoD’s “regulation of perspective thus suggests that the frame can conduct certain kinds of interpretations” (66). Clearly, the restrictions placed on war photographers have framed the Iraqi and Afghani war photos with a certain bias. And these war photos rightfully raise our suspicion.

How might Butler’s argument apply to the New York Photo Festival’s Sandy exhibit? Unlike the photos by embedded reporters, there is a natural legitimacy to the Sandy disaster photos. The New York Photo Festival placed an open call for exhibit submissions. It accepted work from professionals, amateurs, and victims. It placed no restrictions on photo content. As a result, the exhibit has a decidedly disparate quality. The photos jump around from the high rises of midtown Manhattan to the boardwalks of the Jersey shore, from the dense ethnic neighborhoods of Staten Island to the posh

waterfront estates on Long Island. Sometimes photographers focused on the destruction, other times on the surreality of a beach littered with TV controllers or frying pans. The exhibit's lack of direction implies a lack of agenda that lends the Sandy exhibit a credibility that the embedded war photographers could never approach. Hence, we might take comfort that the feelings of compassion the Sandy photos evoke are genuine. But Butler's claims about photography give us reason to pause.

There is something endemic to photography that might alarm the savvy viewer. Butler points out that the simple mechanics of "bringing an image into focus" also necessitates "that some portion of the visual field is ruled out" (74). So, photography actually toys with reality. Butler elaborates further:

The represented image thereby signifies its admissibility into the domain of representability, and thus at the same time signifies the delimiting function of the frame—even as, or precisely because, it does not represent it. In other words, the image, which is supposed to deliver reality, in fact withdraws reality from perception (74-75).

Even though I accept that the Sandy exhibit is not trying to advance a specific agenda, the mechanics of photography do distort reality specifically because of what is not shown. Let me now reconsider the Breezy Point photo to which I felt a strong *simpatico*. I was not seeing the destruction of non-human habitat. I was not seeing all the housing materials that no longer exist on the empty foundations. All this material was swept out to sea, wreaking havoc with marine ecosystems. And unseen still is the further damage that will occur when all the Breezy Point rubbish washes ashore in someone else's community.

I view the exhibit again, this time searching for what the camera lens tries to obscure, to see not just what is in focus but also what is blurred. An exhibit photo of a home on Sea Gate Coney Island provides a good opportunity. The home still stands but with a hole now in it through which a car could pass and through which a viewer can see the ocean. When we focus not on the home but rather at the ocean, we see how precariously close this home sits to the sea. This is perhaps the unintended consequence of the photos. The photographer clearly focused his lens on the house—an act Butler contends places an interpretive spin on the photo's content. But photography (at least un-doctored photography) must still deal with the physical realities of the subject matter. Although the exhibit's images do reveal a great deal of destruction, the proximity of the ocean so close to many of the structures does make obvious the colossally risky location of these building sites. Framing angles and lens manipulation can only do so much. There is a large looming ocean captured in snippets by many of these photos. We need to be cognizant of the photo's framing to fully appreciate the implications of how we view the photos and the response they elicit from us. This is incredibly important. As Butler points out "the way these norms enter

into frames and into larger circuits of communicability are vigorously contestable precisely because the effective regulation of affect, outrage, and ethical response is at stake.” (78) The emotion we feel from these photos drives our ethical response.



Fig. 3. Danielle Mastrion, “Beachfront Living,” Seagate, Brooklyn, 2012.

We are returned to the argument proffered by Nussbaum and the great philosophers Aristotle, Rousseau, and Hume. Compassion serves as the bedrock from which citizens develop a civic-minded concern for humanity. From the standpoint of war—the position from which both Nussbaum and Butler consider the emotional response to photos—they argue that compassion should act to inform our policies. It thus seems appropriate that compassion should also form the basis of our civic response to the hurricane’s destruction. But is it appropriate?

Thus far, the basic argument of looking at photos, whether to evoke Nussbaum’s compassion or Butler’s grieving, seems to imply that our emotional response, that of compassion and/or grieving, will in fact assist us in coming to the correct conclusion

of how to respond. But what if that premise were flawed? Susan Sontag understood just this predicament. In her essay “Looking at War,” Sontag suggests the downside to photos is that the image is all we retain. Sontag contends, “Harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they don’t help us much to understand” (Sontag 14). The intense emotional response overpowers our ability to rationally consider all of the often complex and nuanced issues. And Hurricane Sandy has many such issues that extend beyond the devastation of the affected communities.

The United States Global Change Research Program characterizes the evidence of global climate change as “unequivocal” (Karl 9). The world’s consumption of fossil fuels continues to increase, producing ever more heat-trapping gases to drive up global temperatures. Clearing of natural forests and mismanagement of agricultural lands continues, exacerbating the problem. Warming in this century is on track to be greater than that of the last century. Storm surges and flooding are expected to increase in frequency and severity. What is now considered a “once-in-a-century coastal flood in New York City” will increase in frequency and possibly reach one per decade during this century (109).

Today, there are calls for radical changes to the development of vulnerable coastal areas. San Francisco is orchestrating a “managed retreat” of public land in response to rising sea levels (Lubber 1). Insurers, taxpayers, and various organizations are pushing for stronger building codes, vulnerability assessments, and resiliency mitigation plans as a prerequisite for federal disaster assistance. These are all fitting responses based on what Jay Fishman, CEO of Travelers Insurance, succinctly states: “We’ve embraced the notion that weather is different. If you are not impressed with what the weather has been doing over the last few years, you’re not keeping your eyes open.” (2)

But the New York Photo Festival exhibit stirs our compassion and grief. It leads us to rebuild rather than to adjust to the reality of global climate change. Although society might be better served if we redefine the boundaries of our coastal communities, how do we deny the residents of Breezy Point the chance to rebuild? We cannot. The images of their community have garnered them our most heart-felt compassion.

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MARC PELESSONE '16SEAS is an Applied Mathematics major. He believes quantitative reasoning should play a greater role in our social dialogue. Although Marc is a beach-loving native of San Diego, he thoroughly enjoys Columbia and the many cultural experiences of living in New York City.