

Mentor's Introduction for Blake Smith

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It is a great honor and privilege to introduce Blake Smith's essay, *The Visual Memoir Project: Searching for an Art of Memory*. At the risk of limiting the insights that the reader might glean from spending time with this text, it seems to me that this essay is concerned with how artmaking and artworks – photography and photo-based works in this case – have the potential to teach us something about the world as they provide us with opportunities to come into contact with it, and contemplate it, in our efforts to understand it. *The Visual Memoir Project* is an essay that will invite you to step into the thinking, feeling, seeing, seen and curated world of Blake, an art-maker, teacher, and emerging scholar. You will read how the world shows up for Blake in the situations in which she finds herself (as an artist photographer, educator, researcher, writer, carer, woman – categories and identifications that she pinpoints or implies in her essay), and in the encounters that she has as she walks her now aging dog, Kaylah, in her neighborhood on the east side of Vancouver, British Columbia. And yet, as Blake reminds us, there are things seen but not photographed, things that cannot be given an image, but things that are rarely forgotten.

As you will read this essay you will come to understand how the practice of photography functions as a pedagogical and an epistemic practice for Blake – “the knowing that comes from looking closely” to use her words. Perhaps it, too, could function similarly in and for your practice as an art educator. As she eloquently describes, the practice of photography and the types of thinking that it provokes as well as the types of actions that it conditions, opens the world to her and enables her to bring aspects of the world into presence (Noë, 2012). And so the essay reminds us that every act of writing or image-making is an attempt at something as much as it is an attempt to do something.

As I read this essay, I was reminded of another essay written more than fifty years ago, but as relevant today as it was when it was written in 1964; that is, Susan Sontag's essay, *Against Interpretation*. Of course, Susan Sontag's scholarship is of great importance to Blake's. It guides much of her thinking. In *Against Interpretation*, Sontag (1964) makes a case for resisting the urge to interpret artworks. "In place of a hermeneutics [of art]", she writes, "we need an erotics of art" meaning that we need to be less concerned with decoding or deciphering an artwork's content and more attuned to what an artwork does — how it affects and is effected in every encounter with it. Her essay examines what interpretation does to art, and what happens to art when it is interpreted. Understanding interpretation as, "a conscious act of the mind which illustrates a certain code, certain 'rules' of interpretation", Sontag says, "to interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world - in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings.' It is to turn the world into this world." To interpret an artwork, she suggests, is to assume that it has content; content that can be read, deciphered, explained and shared with others; content that needs to be excavated and made visible because without the interpreter's mediation, it cannot otherwise appear. And so, for Sontag, the widely held belief that artworks are made to convey something and have something to say contributes to legitimating interpretative processes as ways of engaging with works of art. And yet, Sontag is not against the act of describing artworks. Neither does she believe that artworks are beyond description, or that they are of such sacred quality that to describe them is to profane them. Rather, it seems that she is urging her readers to consider additional ways of engaging works of art, ways that resist interpreting them.

For me, this is also what Blake's essay achieves impressively. It encourages you, its reader, to resist the intellectual and affective closure that comes with interpreting art using pre-established interpretative models. It invites you to come to her work through other means. Specifically, it invites you to experience the photo-based works that she presents in her essay as they appear and are given to consciousness on encountering them. Her essay encourages you to resist the urge to figure out what these photo-based works truly mean, or what they could ever mean. I have no doubt, you will enjoy this essay immensely.

References

Noë, A. (2012). *Varieties of presence*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Sontag, S. (1966). *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.