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HYPERALLERGIC

TEJU COLE HAS NOT STOPPED LOOKING OR THINKING

By John Yau, July 29, 2017



Teju Cole was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 1975, raised in Lagos, Nigeria, and educated in England and America, where he earned a degree in art history. The author of three well-received books (two fiction and one collection of essays), he is the photography critic for The New York Times Magazine. By any measure, he is a major figure in American arts and letters. However, in a world full of swaggering braggers, Cole does something very different and it shows in his work: he keeps a low profile and remains humble.

More importantly, Cole has never disconnected himself from the anonymous figures living on the margins of our wasteful, consumer-happy society, nor has he exploited them. He doesn't turn them into either heroes in his fiction, and they are not the center of attention in his photographs; in other words, he doesn't attempt to grant them a status they do not achieve in real life. Although the humanitarian thrust of his work is consistent, he does one thing in his fiction and essays, and another in his photographs, which are being exhibited in his first solo show, Teju Cole: Blind Spot and Black Paper at Steven Kasher Gallery (June 15 – August 11, 2017).

The exhibition is in celebration of his fourth book, Blind Spot, published this year by Random House with a foreword by Siri Hustvedt. Blind Spot contains more than 150 color photographs, each paired with a text by the Cole. Together, they form a travel diary, as the photographs were taken in different cities and places throughout the world: Mexico City,

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Wannsee, Qadisha Valley, Lagos, Beirut, Nairobi, Old Goa, Seoul, Ubud (Indonesia), and Auckland. According to Hustvedt, the book's title refers to the fact that:

One morning in 2011, Teju Cole woke up blind in one eye. He suffered from papillophlebitis, perforations to his retina. The disappearance of sight in one eye makes depth perception impossible, and Cole informs the reader he had trouble walking.

Later, quoting Cole, Hustvedt writes:

The photography changed after that. The looking changed.

As a novelist, Cole has been described as a postcolonial flâneur who is receptive to (is able to channel) the stories of the disenfranchised. He gives the Other a place to speak in his or her words. Here it might be useful to recall how the great French poet and art critic, Charles Baudelaire, who originated the term, described the flâneur:

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the center of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world — impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define.

Cole recognizes that in the postmodern world, the possibilities for the flâneur have changed radically: Can he or she still become one flesh with the crowd or even with another individual?

This is what I meant when I wrote earlier that Cole keeps a low profile and remains humble. As a photographer, you feel that he recognizes invisibility does not give you permission to be invasive. Most of the photographs in the exhibition have no people in them. For those that do, except for one photograph of a boy taken in Brazzaville, which we see two versions of, nearly everyone we do see has his or her back to the camera.

These photographs, most of which were taken in New York City, echo a well-known viewpoint taken by many photographers, from Rudy Burckhardt and Lee Friedlander to Vivian Maier. The question (or challenge) for Cole, who no doubt knows all of their work, was this: What can I bring to this view, given my awareness of who and what has preceded me?

In one photograph, titled "New York City" (May 2015) — all his work is titled by the city where the photograph was taken — we see a man in a gray sweatshirt, its hood over his head, standing at a payphone. The text, which is included in the framed photograph, reads as follows:

What is he saying? To whom is he talking? He is secret in public. The hood is extra secrecy, like the veil Timanthes put over Agamemnon. The phone box frames him in a way that makes me think of a prisoner whose singular lifeline is the telephone that reaches the outside world. Moments later I will encounter the blond woman in green. But I don't know that yet. She's still in the future. Who in these days still uses a pay phone? There are still pay phones? Is he calling someone collect? (Again, I think of imprisonment.) The one to whom he speaks cannot see him: speech without a face. Why do I feel like I have seen him before? [Chris] Marker says remembering is not the opposite of forgetting but rather its

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lining. Imagine, for a moment, that every face you cannot see is your own face, but years later. The future is lined with your future face.

Cole's pairing of photograph and text creates a third thing. By asking whether pay phones exist or not, he locates the photograph in time, recognizes his boundedness. The questions he asks in his text — which functions as a kind of voiceover, as in Marker's great film, *La Jetée* (1962), composed entirely of still shots — become a point of entry for the viewer.

The texts and photographs open up avenues for each other that change from work to work, from the attitude of an impartial observer to that of a historically aware global citizen. In "Baalbek" (May 2016), Cole pairs a photograph of a man in a tree with a text about vertigo and jet lag, and the shift from spatial displacement to chronological displacement: "Finally we had figured out how to move across time faster than time moves across us."

Cole's filmic pairing of photograph and text turn the images into shots from an ongoing chronicle of what he has seen and the states of consciousness it has provoked in him, the unexpected connections and associations. These include biblical texts, classical texts, yesterday's and today's news, memories, research, and much else. They are a record of a man's attempt to stay alive and alert, open to the world he is literally passing through. Imagine a diary in which the author is not the center of attention. This is what Cole does in the age of selfies, and I find that achievement remarkable and moving.

Imagine a photograph in which an anonymous migrant speaks, as in "Beirut" (May 2016), a precipitous view of granite blocks above the ocean. One of the blocks, which has writing on its top, resembles a coffin. Cole's commentary reads:

My darling. They said we wouldn't cross tonight. Now they say we must. My phone is dying. There is a pregnant woman here and she won't stop crying. I will send you a Facebook message tomorrow, inshallah.

Recently, Cole wrote a *New York Times Magazine* review of four photographers — three outsiders and one insider — whose shared subject are the people of indigenous communities, particularly in the Americas. He ended the review, titled, "Getting Others Right" (June 13, 2017), with this observation:

Photography is particularly treacherous when it comes to righting wrongs, because it is so good at recording appearances. Capturing how things look fools us into thinking that we've captured their truth. But appearance is bare fact. Combined with intuition, scrupulous context and moral intelligence, it has a chance to become truth. Unalloyed, it is worse than nothing.

I think anyone who reads these lines would be curious to see Cole's photographs, especially after recognizing that his test of a photograph is how thoroughly it combines "intuition, scrupulous context and moral intelligence." This does more than set the bar high. It challenges the photographer to do more than take pictures. (Here the word "take" is something to consider. If you can take a photograph, can you do the opposite?)

I don't think it is a stretch to say that "moral intelligence" is in short supply these days, especially when it comes to our elected and appointed officials, some of whom believe that the earth is around five thousand five hundred years old and that climate change is a Chinese plot. It is in this world that Cole has found a way to give us states of consciousness — of works that look outward and inward — which challenge us to ask: what must I do to keep looking and thinking in a world that offers distractions of every kind?

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Teju Cole: Blind Spot and Black Paper continues at Steven Kasher Gallery (515 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through August 11.