Impact of Photography on the Representation of The George Town Heritage Site in Penang, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study, along with its practical implementation, intended to combine art with the characteristics of applied photography to draw public attention to the unseen or neglected values of the George Town Heritage Site. The researcher, as an experienced professional commercial photographer and artist, took several photographs of the eroded walls of George Town and installed each large-scale photograph on the same wall that they portrayed to create a piece of art. This street photography exhibition was held for one month, during which the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 43 local and foreign respondents who visited the exhibition. The study utilised qualitative art practice based on judgment sampling and semi-structured interviews as its research methodology. Results show that the project is unique and similar exhibitions do not exist.

Keywords: *applied photography, artistic photography, art practice as research, photographic reality, reality*

INTRODUCTION

For the past 25 years, the researcher has been searching for practical projects that can synthesise applied and artistic photography to draw practical conclusions regarding realistic photographic theories. In the past four years, the researcher discovered that an independent, practical artwork could be created as a form of research. This procedure has never been conducted in any similar photography project. Thus, it is considered unique and innovative.

This study aims to obtain a paradoxical combination of artistic and applied photography that can affect its viewers and direct their attention toward the parts of a heritage that are neglected, unseen, or regarded as worthless. The researcher also intends to demonstrate that the photographic representation of reality catches more attention than reality itself. Through this approach, the eyes or ordinary people can be educated about art, thereby causing them to notice their environment and even develop a sense of place attachment among local residents. To obtain the best practical results, the researcher conducted a street photography show using five precisely cropped, large-scale photographs of the eroded walls of George Town. Each photograph was installed on the same wall that they portrayed during the 2014 George Town Festival (GTF).

This study also aims to determine the effect of the project on the audience, which pertains to its contribution to photographic representation for people from all walks of life. Furthermore, it hopes to enhance the sense of attachment of local residents to their place by getting them to appreciate heritage sites that have been previously considered worthless.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

A plethora of studies have presented theories the effects of visual representation and photography (Hall 1997; Lacewing 2006; Mitchel 1995; Scruton 1981; Snyder and Allen 1975). These theories include "the modern position is that in photography there are certain necessary connections between a photograph and its 'real life' original that simply do not (and perhaps cannot) exist in the 'traditional' arts" (Snyder and Allen 1975: 145). Nevertheless, no practical research has focused on proving these theories. To fill in this gap, the present study was developed based on a practical experiment; it focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of how photographic reality works in the minds of those who encounter it.

Photographs cover our world and provide proofs for what exists or has existed. Photographs offer prior experience of the original reality. Next to photographs, first-hand experience appears increasingly insignificant. Although first-hand experience has once given the impression that photographs demonstrate the function of interpreting reality, photographs appear to have "seized" reality. Therefore, understanding a photograph itself is crucial, not only to expose a lost reality, but also to determine how a photograph becomes a representative structure of its own consensus (Crimp 1979).

That is, this type of photographic representation is capable of upgrading the visual culture of a society, making its people sensitive to visual arts and investing considerable funds for their education. Any object that has been recorded as a photograph is considered significant due to an assumption that the object is valuable enough to merit being photographed, particularly when the photograph is taken by a professional or prominent photographer, printed in large scale, and exhibited. A photograph, as a form of simulated reality, is capable of granting credit or amplifying the credit of an object.

Bourdieu indicated that "the range of (the objects) that suggests itself as really photographable for a given social class (that is, the range of 'takeable' photographs or photographs 'to be taken,' as opposed to the universe of realities objectively photographable given the technical possibilities of the camera) objectively determine the meaning that a group confers upon the photographic act as the ontological choice of an object perceived as worthy of being photographed, which is captured, stored, communicated, shown, and admired" (1996: 6).

Therefore, the frame choice of a photographer can potentially affect and educate the mind of the public, regardless of whether laymen or elites. Sontag stated that "in teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing" (1977: 3).

RELATED WORKS

Although several masterpieces have been exhibited publicly, artists typically do not use photographs, or have not used photographs as an essential part of representational interpretation.

Photo 1   Barbara Kruger*, We don't need another hero* (1989). New York.
Source: http://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/362/barbara-kruger (accessed 25 May 2015).

Barbara Kruger, a feminist graphic designer and photographer, has exhibited her artworks on public billboards (Photo 1) to serve as meaningful complimentary photographs to the message. Jenny Holzer (Photo 2) and Martin Firrell (Photo 3) have held street art exhibitions based on sociopolitical slogans. Although these prominent figures are well-known in the world of visual arts, none of them uses photographs as the primary media in their artworks.

Photo 2   Jenny Holzer, *Protect Me from What I Want* (1982). New York.
Source: http://scrofulous.blogspot.my/ (accessed 25 May 2015).

Photo 3   Martin Firrell, *War is Always a Failure* (2009). London.
Source: http://www.martinfirrell.com/ (accessed 25 May 2015).

In the aforementioned examples, the artworks were not based solely on photography, but rather, photographs were used to represent issues in the pieces where they were installed.

Conversely, William Anastasi (1933), an American visual and conceptual artist, created a number of artworks to represent an object that nobody cares about. The walls of visual art galleries always welcome art pieces because people will not visit a gallery with bare walls. Anastasi took photographs of these walls with a slightly darker and smaller scale and then installed them on the same wall that they were portraying (Photo 4).

These photographs do not have a subject, except for the same white walls, in which they are placed. Anastasi simultaneously emphasised the representational essence of photography and its covering feature. Through the unique representation of photography, he managed to get people to attend and view something that they never thought should be observed. Although his name was sufficient to bring audience to his gallery, the photographic interpretation of the walls drew the eyes of the audience to the walls themselves. The inspiration of the practical project in the current research is the wall artworks of Anastasi exhibited in the Candace Dwan Gallery in New York in 1966–1967.

Kenneth Josephson (1932) is another photographer–artist who has produced a number of artworks that involve creating a corresponding image of a subject with the subject as itself. He uses his work to draw attention to the physical aspect of photography. Josephson has used various techniques, such as layering photographs within photographs, to identify the degrees of truthfulness and illusion within a medium. His conceptual approach humorously alters perspective, scale, and point of view; it emphasises the relationship between the photograph of the subject and the subject itself (Photo 5).

The street exhibition held for the present research aims to define its unique characteristics. It was initially inspired by the white walls of the gallery photographs of Anastasi. Although a general resemblance is observed between these two exhibitions, the consequences were completely different from the objectives of Anastasi, as discussed in the succeeding sections.

PRACTICAL RESEARCH PROJECT

George Town, in addition to its narrow streets, lanes, and by-lanes, has walls that have eroded after hundreds of years. Mother Nature has created unique images on these walls, which are remarkably inspiring and distinct from one another. Some of these walls have been renovated,
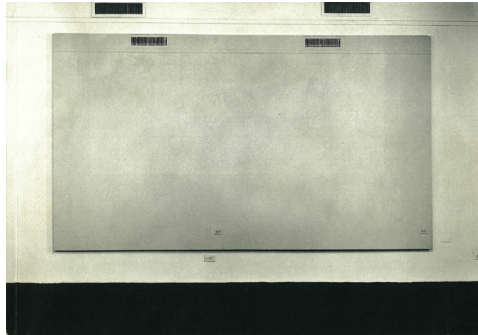
Photo 4   William Anastasi, *Untitled* (1966–7). Candace Dwan Main Gallery, New York.
Source: http://radicalart.info/concept/tautology/photo/index.html.

Photo 5   Kenneth Josephson, *Drottingholm, Sweden* (1967).
Source: http://www.artnet.com/artists/kenneth-josephson/ (accessed 25 May 2015).

whereas others are currently being renovated. Each ancient wall tells its history in the form of abstract images, which unconsciously remind us of abstract expressionist paintings. However, few people pay attention to these parts of the George Town Heritage Site. Nonetheless, the imprinted walls tell the story of George Town through image icons and picture language. Thus, these walls deserve attention.

In recent years, contrivances, such as graffiti and wire statues, have been added to the walls to make the streetscape look attractive. Although they aim to attract visitors, these additions do not direct the eyes of the visitors to the walls themselves.

Heritage sites are among the most attractive places to visit. Photographs of heritage sites have been taken since the beginning of photography. Photographs frequently replace real objects and events. Evidently, a heritage site is not only an exception, but is actually one of the most favorite subjects to photograph.

In general, people only get acquainted with this subject through video footages and photographs, except for people who have traveled to visit these sites. The story is different for local residents who live in these heritage sites or for those who pass them every now and then. Although these people are proud of their heritage sites, they have likely become accustomed to them due to constant contact, and thus, do not pay attention to their details (Jenkins 2003).

The researcher organised a street photography exhibition during GTF 2014 as a practical art project and an experiment to search for solutions to the problems mentioned in this study. The subjects of the photographs were the eroded walls of George Town that resembled abstract expressionist paintings. Each photograph was printed in large-scale and installed on the same wall that was portrayed as its subject.

ART PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH

An artwork can be considered a location where knowledge is created; moreover, meanings are formulated because a work of art is a form of human representation. Studies on artworks share new perceptions into how objects carry the meaning of ideas, themes, and issues. As a research object, an artwork is an independently and ethnically created form, and thus, can be considered a mine of knowledge (Sullivan 2010).

Therefore, with these objectives, the researcher decided to conduct an art practice-based study as part of a qualitative research model. The methodology has also been applied to photo-elicitation interviews to obtain the most reliable results (Rose 2012).

Non-probability purposive sampling (judgment sampling) was used in this study. This type of sampling obtains information from a specific target group that can provide the desired data based on the criteria set by the researchers. Judgment sampling aims to approach possible respondents who can provide the required information based on the objectives of the study (Sekaran and Bougie 2010).

For data collection, the present study adopted the interview method. An interview is defined by Jennings as "an interaction following a question–answer format (stimulus–response) or an interaction more akin to a conversation" (2005: 101). Three common types of interview based on context and structure have been discussed in the literature: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews (Jennings 2005). A semi-structured interview based on six pre-determined questions was adopted in the current research. A total of 44 interviewees were selected by the researcher through this sampling method; 22 of the 44 interviewees were local residents, whereas the others were from various parts of the world. Among the 22 locals, 11 were from Penang and six live in George Town.

Photo 6   Farhad Fakhrian, *Lebuh Ah Quee, George Town Festival* (2014).
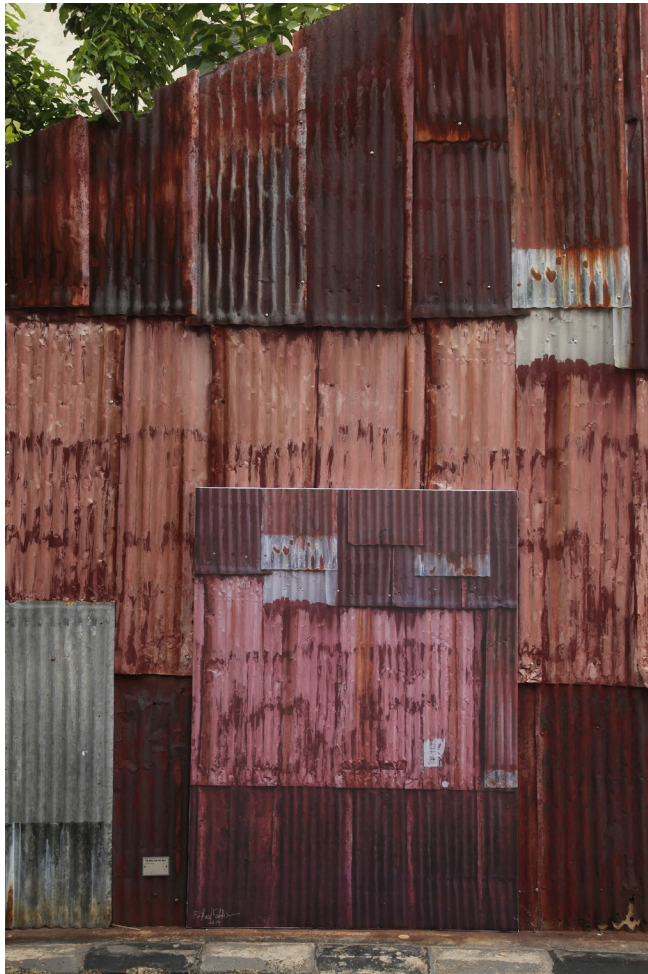Source: Photo by Farhad Fakhrian.

Photo 7   Farhad Fakhrian, *Lebuh Armenian, George Town Festival* (2014).
Source: Photo by Farhad Fakhrian.

Photo 8 Farhad Fakhrian, *Love Lane Back Lane, George Town Festival* (2014).
Source: Photo by Farhad Fakhrian.

Photo 9 Farhad Fakhrian, *Love Lane, George Town Festival* (2014).
Source: Photo by Farhad Fakhrian.

Photo 10   Farhad Fakhrian, *Stewart Lane, George Town Festival* (2014).
Source: Photo by Farhad Fakhrian.

The thematic analysis technique, which is defined as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 80), was applied. Braun and Clarke (2006) asserted that thematic analysis provides a feasible and theoretically versatile approach to analyse qualitative data. The researcher used this technique to study interview transcripts to capture the essence and extract the content. The motivating features of the data across the whole data set were then coded methodically.

Three common procedures (i.e., triangulation, prolonged engagement in the field, and peer review by the researcher) were used to examine the validity and reliability of the interviews. The narrative accounts were considered valid (Creswell and Miller 2000) given that the researcher performed these procedures and relied on multiple forms of documents rather than only one event or data point. Moreover, the researcher underwent the review process several times to avoid any possible validity threats and to maintain depth.

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ANALYSIS

The researcher first discussed the findings relevant to the original themes and sub-themes associated with photographic presentation and photographic reality. Then, the researcher aimed to analyse the themes connected with the art of photography and the heritage site. These themes are significant aspects of the practical project that supports the discussions and direct statements from the participants.

Nearly all the participants stated that they did not consider the eroded walls part of the heritage site. Most of the interviewees pointed out that they concentrated on the photographs first before observing the walls.

I passed by and saw the picture, and then I thought what a cool wall.

Susan Sontag argued that photography is the art where the "interesting" triumphs first, and the new photographic sense of seeing proposed that everything is a potential subject for the camera. Something beautiful could not have yielded such a range of subjects and would soon appear to be "uncool." In a photograph of a sunset, particularly a beautiful sunset, anyone with a minimal standard for verbal sophistication might prefer to say, "yes, the photograph is interesting" (2002: 24).

The pictures cause us to pay more attention to our city.

The researcher heard this statement several times from local residents, and even from international visitors, during photographic trail sessions. As an artist, the photographer is regarded as an exceptional sort of seer; he/she can opt to take a specific photograph that will lend authority and credibility to the picture (Wells 2009).

What have been installed on the walls is not real, but they catch more attention than the real ones.

Photography has been attributed with the mission to "realistically" replicate the impression of actuality. A photograph has a unique and distinctive connection with what is/was in front of the camera technically, aesthetically, and organically (Wells 2009). A respondent who was also an artist–photographer described his feelings as follows:

I think the picture highlights create[s] a Venus and make[s] you think again.

Familiar-looking subjects enunciated through established aesthetic concords and further gains realistic notions linked with photography (Eco 1982).

Last time I passed by these walls, I ignored them; but this time, the photos stopped me to look at them.

I have passed by these areas several times, but the walls did not catch my eyes

One of the respondents, a European visual artist, shared the preceding statement. Another local respondent replied:

These pictures cause us to rethink about what we have seen before.

Analogical photography theories point out that a photograph directly replicates abandoned circumstances. Hence, a sense of authenticity borrowed by the photograph is observed (Wells 2009).

Following the aforementioned theory, two respondents made nearly the same comments:

Of course, the picture is more eye-catching because it has a frame.

There will be the frame that is more eye-catching than the wall.

This comment strongly reminds us of the "Parergon" of Derrida and Owens (1979). The question that arises will be, "Is it only the frame that causes the audience to pay attention?" That is, will the effect be similar if only an empty frame is placed instead of the photograph? This issue can be a topic for another research on the visual effects of attributes of the medium.

In this case, the pictures caught my eyes more because they are different from reality. This is fantastic!

This statement from a respondent is meditative. She pointed out that the pictures differ from reality. By contrast, the general belief is that photographs are only representatives of reality. She further added that this toggle between reality and photographic reality was fantastic.

Walter Benjamin argued that valuable unique objects formerly located in a special place, such as a museum or gallery, lose their uniqueness when they become reachable to numerous people in a public place. The objects also lose their "aura," which is linked to an artwork that is now free to different readings and interpretations. Therefore, photography is inherently more democratic (2008).

> *I never noticed and paid close attention to the walls until I observed these pictures.*

> *If the picture was not there, then I would not notice the wall.*

> *I do not think that without the pictures, I would pay attention to walls.*

> *Of course, the photo (caught my eyes). I would not have paid attention to the walls if there were no photos.*

The photograph appeared to have a particular power to transform common objects into something important, precious, fantastic, or valuable, or something that is related to the current communication, preference, education, and experiences.

Siegfried Kracauer (a German critic) and Andre Bazin (a French critic) emphasised the ontological relation of a photograph to reality (Bazin 1967; Kracauer 1960).

> *I looked at the photos as an art form, and then I noticed the walls precisely.*

> *At this moment, the picture (caught my eyes) because we do not see the picture in reality all the time.*

Nearly most of the participants emphasised that they focused on the walls after noticing the photographs. In fact, the photographs framed limited visual contexts, which influenced and circumscribed the actual experience of the participants.

> *These artworks caused me to see the walls and think that they could be so inspiring.*

> *These are artworks that have come from a gallery and will engage a lot of people with art.*

These comments appear to contradict the belief of Benjamin, who claims that the mechanical reproduction of an image changes the attitude toward art. Singularity, special place to display, and the aura attached to an artwork are the issues that resulted in the loss of the effect of the mechanical reproduction of an image (Benjamin, 2008). At present, the photograph appeared to have captured the aura that formerly belonged to unique works of art and changed the position from museums and galleries to public sites. The singularity of a photograph is ignored because of the appropriation and representation of reality in such a manner that only photography can afford.

> *I can see the difference between a piece of art and reality.*

> *It is like the creation of a new reality.*

These comments remind us of the prominent statement of Bazin, who remarked that, "Photograph is not an image of reality […], but rather a true imprint of reality, a kind of luminous mold […]. There is ontological identity between the object and its photographic image (1967)."

> *The photos showed the walls as important objects and we can see the culture, change, taste, and other manners of local people through them.*

This statement from a local artist has several significant themes on photography. First, every object that becomes a photograph will gain value and deserves to be observed. That is, common objects are ignored or stay unseen, unless they are presented as a photograph.

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A function of the camera is to grant legitimacy to a subject (Sontag 1979). Second, this respondent portrays the photographs of walls as the pages or tablets of visual history. Thus, culture, social changes, taste, and other characteristics of the local people become readable through the photographs.

Photography is significantly indicative of social reality. This medium is related to the soul and plays a role beyond the description of appearances and outer forms of the material world (Grundberg 1990).

This (project) can help preserve the heritage.

In my opinion, as long as these photos are next to the walls, they can be considered artworks.

In fact, these photos attract the attention of viewers to the historic walls.

These three statements from respondents express different themes. These photographs, when combined with their subjects, can create new places for heritage lovers to visit and draw the attention to formerly ignored directions. Furthermore, all the participants confirmed that this combination established a unique artistic site and aesthetic view.

This representation of reality made me look at the things around me carefully.

I do not look at the walls regularly, but this (exhibition) enables me to see them and think that they can be so inspiring.

Photographic representation has the potential to have greater effect than other visual media because reproducing the appearance of its subject absolutely allows the viewer to look at the subject, as long as he/she desired. A photograph may even be thought of as having replaced reality as a mode of visual representation. Hence, photography is a representational art if the interest in a photograph as a photographic representation is a type of aesthetic interest (Scruton 1981).

> *The medium taught me how to see the walls, and maybe next time, educate me about something else. It helps us to organise our thought.*

> *It does make you look at real things. I used to look differently as an artist, but it refers to reality in a new form.*

> *Certainly, this kind of exhibition can educate the common people and help them to understand either current art or what is unseen there.*

> *Choosing a part of reality with the most similarity to the reality can make people think about it.*

In terms of the attachment to the heritage of local residents and their sense of pride, the local interviewees made the following comments:

> *These photos made me more attached to the George Town Heritage Site.*

> *I think art brings more attention and deeper attachment to the heritage.*

> *I think this kind of project for the local people develop[s] a sense of pride or at least attachment.*

> *That is the complex that can make people (feel) more attachment.*

With regard to the uniqueness of the practical project (i.e., The Walls on the Walls Exhibition), some of respondents provided the following opinions:

> *I have not seen any exhibition like this.*

> *This was my first time to see photos on objects.*

> *That is really the thing that I am interested in about this exhibition.*

> *I have never seen something like that.*

This was the first time, it is a fresh idea.

This is totally unique and interesting, quite fresh, and cool.

Significant features, the possibility of observing both object and the photo side by side, it was a unique feeling.

I have never seen an exhibition where reality and its reflection through a medium are represented together.

This exhibition has shown a unique manner to keep the nature of heritage in photograph as an art.

The idea was very new, and it was the first time. The photos show the big image of the complex.

Never had the subject of an exhibition been this simple and as clever as it could be delivered.

It was my first experience, so unique.

Finally, the participants were asked about their definition of photography or photograph. This issue is essential because it serves as an index to their perception of photography. The following are some of the answers of the interviewees:

Transmitting a message or feeling by freezing time and collecting reflected light as a still picture.

A way of art, capturing the memory, just catching the moment to keep memories.

Represent a mechanical capturing of what is up in some form, whether directly or manipulated.

> *A technical instrument that is able to capture a specific instance and display a pictorial moment.*

> *A kind of visual art that is everywhere and represents pictures that simulate reality.*

> *Capturing a moment of time or a glimpse of the treat from the perspective of the artist.*

Indeed, all the interviewees had similar experiences when faced with the photographs on the walls. The photographs made them see the details that they had never paid attention to as something with artistic value or potential; thus, they agreed that realistic representation can educate and optimise the vision of the audience to notice unseen artistic values.

The finding is supported by the discourses of thinkers, such as Susan Sontag (1977), Allan Sekula (1982), Mary Price (1997), Max Kozloff (1979), Victor Burgin (1982), Andre Bazin (1960), and Roland Barthes (1981). A photograph acts as an index that can sometimes be iconic; hence, it does not only add an aura of authenticity, but also appears reassuringly familiar. The articulation of familiar-looking subjects through established aesthetic traditions further nurtures realist notions linked with photography (Burgin 1982).

An interesting finding is that while the local residents mentioned that they have seen these walls hundreds of times before, they have never observed them in detail (as objects for works of art). This finding shows that simulated reality has the power to educate and enhance the observational skills of people when it is presented beside objective reality. This finding is supported by Stanczak (2007) who stated that, "to a certain degree, visual representation is already a staple behavioral science."

Furthermore, the findings indicate that making people observe their environment more precisely through photographic representation is possible. However, people have less relation with nature and their environment, and tend to experience reality through its representation. This issue has gradually caused media to be replaced with the original truth and has been discussed in the prominent theory of simulation and simulacra by Baudrillard when he stated that, "It is a circular process—that of simulation, that of the hyper-real. The hyper-reality of communication and of a meaning. More real than the real, that is how the real is abolished" (1994: 81). Current features can also be used to direct the minds of the people

to the perception of art and sensitise their emotions to discover art around them. Significant findings showed that people pay more attention to photographic reality than to reality or objective reality. These findings are supported by the theories of Cuyper (1997), Braden (1978), and Sontag (1977).

ARTISTIC CONSIDERATIONS

The graft of the artistic trend of photography with the applied attribute probably occurred for the first time and was significantly successful. It showed that the public representation of art photography has the power to attract and educate common people about art and the environment. The attachment of the photograph on its subject in a public viewing site is a new concept that can clarify several unanswered questions on the role of photography as a medium in shaping the mind of the audience, and the power of simulated reality in contemporary art.

Undoubtedly, the audience has seen photographs representing their heritage, although they have never seen photographs of a common but odd part (i.e., walls) of the heritage, which are installed on their subjects as large-scale works of art.

The first result implies that photographic representation may act as an artistic event that can catch the eyes and educate the sense of aesthetics of people from all walks of life. None of the locals nor the foreign visitors passing by the walls consider them important or at least a part of the heritage site. Therefore, numerous walls have been renovated or are currently being renovated instead of being conserved as a part of the George Town Heritage Site that highlights the antiquity of the site similar to a visual historic book. The results also show that photographic representation, as simulated reality, has become infinitely more attractive than objective reality. The respondents (particularly the locals) were surprised with how they have neglected this beauty that has been in front of their eyes for a long time.

The results also indicated that the significance of the effects of such street photography exhibitions as a representational medium on the perception of an individual toward reality has been supported. This finding is similar to the theory of Barthes, in which he argued that "the photograph is indescribable: words cannot substitute for the weight or impact of the resemblance of the image" (Wells 2009: 33).

Moreover, the majority of the respondents enjoyed and considered the photographs works of art. This finding suggests that photographic representation can be used as simulated reality to draw the attention of the public toward a significantly important yet ignored or

neglected site, such as the walls in heritage sites. The local participants also remarked that they felt close attachment to the heritage site and felt proud of their legacy after visiting the exhibition.

This type of artistic representation can optimise the opportunity of onlookers to discover neglected artistic values. The participants emphasised that this exhibition caused them to rethink about their knowledge regarding the George Town Heritage Site. They also believed that the show made a realistic representation comparative to reality that caused the audience to ponder on the medium and reality.

Another conclusion of this study is that people need to have something similar but infinitely more attractive than reality to enable them to notice objective reality, and photographic representation, as a form of simulated reality, may fulfil this role. Choosing the part of reality with the most similarity to actual reality (i.e., photographic representation) can make people notice and think in such manner. This street photography exhibition was one of the most popular events of the 2014 GTF. Therefore, photographic representation, although extremely popular, familiar, and repetitive, is a strong medium that can affect the minds of the people.

Lastly, another achievement of this study is that the exhibition, although not evidently or directly, has motivated local residents to consider preserving the parts of the heritage site that were previously unseen or assumed as unimportant. Therefore, this type of artistic representation may strongly influence people to become aware of what they have.

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