

Does Size Matter?

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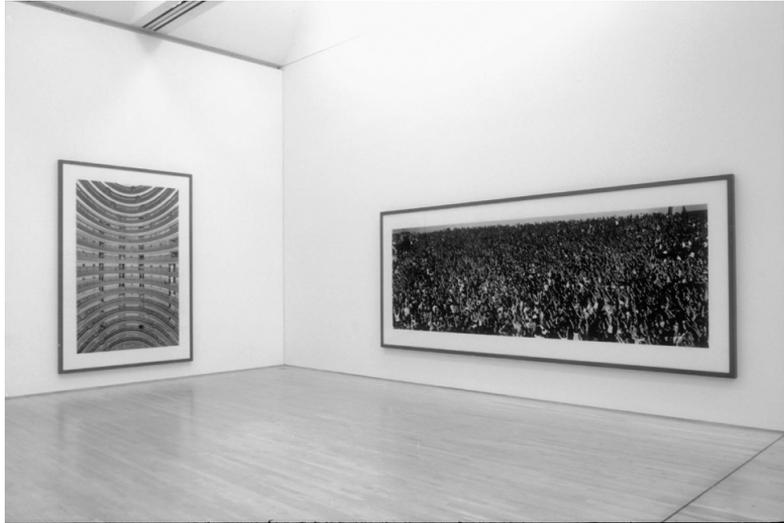
WHAT HAS HAPPENED to photographic intimacy? Not to the representation of intimacy *in* photographs but to the intimacy that used to exist between a viewer and a photograph, the intimacy of the photographic experience?

Size seems to have something to do with it, for we are currently living through the era of the big photograph. Make that Very Big. Recent exhibitions of the work of Richard Avedon, Thomas Struth and Andreas Gursky have featured gallery after gallery of enormous photographic prints, and the experience can be a little overwhelming. We're talking about photographs the size of nineteenth-century history paintings, or, to use a more recent and apt comparison, Abstract Expressionist canvases of the 1940s and '50s. Like them, these photographs fill your peripheral as well as your central vision, absorbing you into their intricate patterns and slick, colorful surfaces. Their largeness forces you to stand back to take it all in (it's no coincidence that modern gallery spaces long ago abandoned the domestic interior as their model and have adopted instead the scale and antiseptic aesthetic of the showroom or the warehouse). But when you step back the ten or fifteen paces that's required to see the picture as a whole, you lose the ability to make out the details that large photographs promise to provide. So you come back in close, this time losing that sense of the overall picture but at least gaining, you hope, some insight into how they've been made. You scan a small section of Gursky's 16

foot 8 inch wide print of *May Day IV* (2000) to try and find some repetition in the bodies and gestures of the dancers featured there, as if to spot the digital seams, the cuts and pastes, that surely made this extended panorama of ravers possible (Fig 1). But this close viewing doesn't get you very far. As with a Pollock painting, the details fascinate but they don't tell you anything you didn't already know from looking from a distance. In fact, the details are kind of blurry; they certainly don't involve you emotionally. That's because Gursky's photographs are about, in part, their own bigness (would they have any interest at all if they were small?), and to appreciate their grandly abstract renditions of the world you have to abandon any desire for an intimate relationship with the photograph itself.

In this sense, the size of Gursky's prints does indeed matter. The sublimity of their scale in relation to the human body, the cold distance they maintain between us and them, even their towering ambition, all symbolically embody the globalization that is this artist's theme.¹ But their scale is also representative of the recent history of international art photography, which has seen an exponential growth in the size of prints over the past few years. It wasn't always like this, even for Gursky. His prints from the mid-1980s, for example, were only about 20 by 24 inches. It was in 1989 that he, along with other German photo-artists of his generation, began to order larger chromogenic color prints

Fig 1. Ian Reeves Installation view of Andreas Gursky exhibition (including *May Day IV*, 2000). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2003. Courtesy of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



from their lab (one important consequence of deciding on larger print sizes is that individual artists can no longer do the work themselves). Peter Galassi has suggested various reasons for this initial decision to »go big«. A desire to compete with painting, both on the walls of the gallery and in the market place (the bigger the picture, the bigger the price, or so artists and their dealers hope), coincided with improvements in printing technology, a financial ability to pay the lab fees, and a rivalry between photographers (when one of them printed large, they all wanted to).²

Galassi also argues that the larger size enhances, or even creates, the aesthetic effect of the work, at least as far as Gursky's peer Thomas Ruff is concerned: »the enlargements transformed his portraits from a series of heads at more or less human scale into the monumental icons of blankness that were soon so widely admired.«³ This interests me, this question of the effect of size on the meaning of the work. For his 2001 exhibition in the U.S., Gursky had his earlier photographs reprinted to a somewhat

larger size (»so as to unify the exhibition«), from about 20 x 24 inches to about 36 x 32 inches (thus also changing them from horizontal to vertical formats).⁴ So at what point in this process of reprinting does size come to matter? At what point does a photograph become one thing rather than another, induce this affect rather than that?

This reprinting of work to make it larger has become common among contemporary artists. Take the work of Cindy Sherman, for example. Her celebrated *Untitled Film Stills*, made between 1977 and 1980, were originally printed as 10 x 8 inch gelatin silver prints. They were conceived and presented, in other words, as simulations of actual film stills (or, more accurately, of press prints issued by a studio to promote a film). But a little later the artist commissioned a further edition of three sets of these images that were printed at either 40 x 30 inches or 20 x 16 inches each. These bigger prints brought the *Untitled Film Stills* into step with Sherman's color work, which became progressively larger with each new series.⁵ Rosalind Krauss associ-



Fig 2. Malick Sidibé Installation view of exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, 2003. Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

ates the *Untitled Film Stills* with »the condition of being a copy *without* an original.«⁶ Perhaps this is why the *Stills* are reproduced at all sorts of different sizes throughout Krauss's 1994 book on Sherman, some quite small and some spread over two pages, as if size simply doesn't matter to our reception of this work. One can certainly understand why an artist would choose to cash in on her own fame and provide the market with what it apparently now wants – big pictures. But in this case there are actual »originals« to go by, a consistent, repetitiously sized series of 10 x 8 inch prints designed to conjure a specific referent, the genre of the film still. They don't read as »film stills« when blown up to four times their original size. They read as »Shermans,« a fashionable art trophy bearing a signature style, a mere simulacrum of a

once-abrasive postmodernism. I've seen these bloated »Shermans« in art museums, pretending to be »film stills.« If these museums have any interest at all in providing a representative history of art photography (rather than just an obedient reflection of the machinations of the market place), they should immediately replace these prints with their smaller antecedents.

It seems strange to be insisting on an »original« when talking about postmodern art. Or, for that matter, when talking about photography, a medium capable of being reproduced at almost any imaginable size. But if we are going to come up with an historical account of photography that emulates the peculiar qualities of this medium, the first thing we have to do is acknowledge the reproducibility of the photograph. And the way to do that is not to ignore

the question of size, and the fact that there are sometimes many versions of the same negative, but to talk about it, a lot. When was the last time you saw an exhibition, or a book, present different prints from the same negative? Or actually make an effort to reproduce works in a way that indicates their relative sizes?⁷ Photographs can potentially be printed to almost any size, but in actuality they usually come to us with quite particular dimensions, for quite particular reasons (technical, commercial, aesthetic).⁸ It's time that historians addressed themselves to these particularities and thereby dealt with the photograph as a physical thing and a malleable commodity, as well as an image.

The case of Malian photographer Seydou Keïta is instructive in this regard. Keïta, who died in 2001, spent his life working in Mali's capital city Bamako. After beginning his career as a professional photographer in 1939, he set up his own studio in 1948, then closed it in 1962 to work for the Malian government (in the criminal investigation department), retiring in 1977. He first became prominent here in the USA after an exhibition at the Museum of African Art in New York in the 1980s featured some of his portraits as background illustrations (but without naming him as the photographer). Struck by those images, a man named André Magnin visited Bamako in 1993 and sought Keïta out. Orchestrated by Magnin, Keïta's career in the West has boomed ever since, fueled by the thousands of negatives that he had kept intact from his former studio and by our own desire for a bit of exotic Africa. I first saw his work in 1996 as part of the exhibition *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the present*, presented at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Like everyone else I was immediately impressed by their distinctive patterning and stark play of black and white tones, and by the formal pose

of their dignified African subjects. The prints on display were provided by the Fonds National d'Art Contemporain in Paris, were dated at 1949 or 1952-55, and were either 40 x 30 cm or 30 x 40 cm in size. I've since seen them in versions as large as 77 x 60 cm, for example in 2001 at the Fogg Art Museum in Boston.

Keïta himself saw these prints for the first time in Europe. »You can't imagine what it was like for me the first time I saw prints of my negatives printed large-scale, no spots, clean and perfect. I knew then that my work was really, really good.«⁹ These large-scale prints were obviously made with the photographer's approval, and presumably to his financial benefit. Indeed, Keïta was acutely aware that negatives are capable of numerous, different, positive manifestations. »My wish is that my negatives will live on for a very long time... It is true, my negatives breathe like you and me.«¹⁰ So no-one can complain about the production and dissemination of these large versions of Keïta's photographs. Unless, of course, you actually care about their meanings and functions in Mali, where they were first taken. For Keïta tells us that he never used an enlarger during his own career, always selling his portraits as contact prints from 13 x 18 cm negatives in a »postcard format« (created by putting a piece of cardboard over the lower half of the camera, allowing two images to be made on one sheet of film; apparently, this format »was all people ever asked for«).¹¹

I've seen a lot of Keïta's images but I've never seen a vintage Keïta print. However a recent exhibition in New York of vintage-like prints by his compatriot Malick Sidibé gave some idea of how they might have looked.¹² (Fig. 2) Also about the size of a postcard, Sidibé's photographs, mostly portraits of full-length figures, were placed between two sheets of glass and then taped around the edges with

brown masking tape and suspended by a piece of string from the back. A typical example, such as *Untitled* (1982), comes in at 5 1/2 x 3 1/2 inches. Tightly framed by Sidibé's camera, his subjects crowd the edges of the picture plane, as if the photographer couldn't afford to waste any space. At this scale, the tonal contrasts are condensed and concentrated, but never to the point of abstraction, with details remaining sharp and clear. The small size of these photographs makes them suitable for sending through the post or for display in a domestic interior, but also insists on a close inspection and therefore a physical intimacy between us and them. Only one person can peer into them at a time, thus creating a very private viewing experience (you can be with yourself as you look, if you know what I mean). All in all, it's all a very different experience from the one you get when they are printed at 77 x 60 cm, as some of Sidibé's were in the Fogg in Boston. There they posed as »art« as we in the West understand it, something to be looked at and admired with the eyes but not necessarily felt in the heart.

Compare this sort of artistic experience to the more intimate relationship to photographs many enjoyed in the nineteenth century. Back then photographs were often combined with an actual portion of the body of the subject being portrayed, usually a piece of hair; both were then presented in a locket or pendant. By this means the body of the viewer is physically involved with the photograph (which is experienced in the hand as an object rather than simply as an image). These viewers also get to touch the body of the other, at least in the imagination (the hair was frequently put behind glass in its own mini-sarcophagus). Sometimes this touch was made literal. Check out a pair of small bracelets woven from human hair, each with an inset daguerreotype portrait (one of a man

and the other of a woman), now held by Eastman House in Rochester. Someone (probably she) spent considerable creative time and skill weaving this hair, thinking of her loved one the while, slowing memory down, making it something to be savored (something intimate). One result is that seeing and touching are here made simultaneous and synonymous. But it also makes the experience of the photograph an intensely private one (a sensation felt at the level of the skin). In these objects, the touch of the bodies of these two lovers is made real and continuous, warming each other's wrists as a physical, permanent, and public reminder of the missing person and of their relationship to each other.

Of course putting a big photograph on a wall doesn't in itself preclude the viewer from a potentially intimate experience of it. But it doesn't help either. Photography places all of its subjects firmly in the past and this temporal distancing is repeated by larger photographs in spatial terms, literally pushing us back from the print as well as from those subjects. But going miniature is not necessarily the answer either, for intimacy is not quite the same as physical closeness (you can have sex with someone and not be intimate with them). The problem here is that intimacy remains a hard thing to define. You know it when you feel it – that sense of personal, private involvement with another person or thing, of a shared emotional investment in that relationship – but it remains a nebulous, not-quite-describable kind of experience, often measured at the level of the body (in the gut) rather than the intellect. It's also one of those experiences that doesn't happen unless you're already open to it. Whether or not it is triggered by the photograph, intimacy is, it might be said, »an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there.*«¹³ The

challenge for photographers is to produce work that can induce such a dynamic, that can engender an emotional exchange between photograph and observer. This is no easy task. As in so many other things, it seems, size matters, but skill matters more.

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Endnotes

1. See Alix Ohlin, »Andreas Gursky and the Contemporary Sublime«, *Art Journal*, 61: 4 (Winter 2002), pp. 22-35.
2. Peter Galassi, *Andreas Gursky*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2001, p. 27.
3. Galassi, 2001.
4. Galassi, 2001, p. 184.
5. Sherman's »rear-projection« series of *Untitled* color prints made in 1980, for example, were printed at 20 x 24 inches, the 1981 »centerfold« pictures were presented at 24 x 48 inches, the »pink robe« pictures of 1982 were printed at 45 x 30 inches, the »civil war« images of 1991 came in at 47 x 70 inches, and the »sex pictures« of 1992 topped out at 75 x 60 inches.
6. Rosalind Krauss, *Cindy Sherman 1975-1993*, Rizzoli, 1994, p. 17.
7. Books devoted to the history of photography rarely make much of an effort to reproduce pictures at their original size, or at a scale relative to each other. Larry Schaaf's recent book on the work of Talbot is an exception in this regard, scrupulously reproducing each print as a one-to-one copy. See Larry Schaaf, *The Photographic Art of William Henry Fox Talbot*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2000.
8. In general, early photographs were either unique images on metal or contact prints made from relatively small paper or glass negatives (even glass »mammoth plates« were only 18 x 22 inches). By about 1860, so-called solar cameras were sometimes used to make enlargements, and these could produce prints as big as 70 x 120 inches. But the use of enlargers only became a common part of photographic practice in the 1880s.
9. Seydou Keïta, interviewed in Bamako, Mali on November 15, 2000, by Michelle Lamunière, in Michelle Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That: The Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé*, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge 2001, p. 47.
10. Seydou Keïta, as quoted by Alioune Bâ, in Clare Bell et al., *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the present*, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1996, p. 268.
11. Keïta, in Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That*, 2001, p. 47. See also Seydou Keïta, from an interview with André Magnin, 1995/96, in Gerald Matt and Thomas MieBgang eds., *Flash Afrique! Photography from West Africa*, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, 2002, p. 67.
12. The exhibition, titled 'Studio Malick', was held at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, January-February 2003. The work on display was printed in 2002 using earlier negatives, but was presented in a traditional Malian format.
13. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Hill & Wang, New York, 1981, p. 55.

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