

# Semiotic Analysis of Richard Ross' Art Photography Juvenile-in-Justice

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## Abstract

In art photography, there is an idea that artists want to convey to the public. Because photography records reality, to convey a specific idea it is often necessary to use symbols from real objects that are appropriate so that the viewer can direct his mind to where the artist wants. It is hoped that this research will explain why Richard Ross' work has succeeded in bringing the public in the direction that the artist wants by using the right visual symbols. Then from the method that has been read, novice photography artists can follow the method they use so that the work can become more visually precise.

**Keywords:** *Photography, Symbol, Semiotics. Documentary, Fine Art*

## 1. Introduction

Initially, the researcher planned to create photographic works of art that used symbols as message representations. However, in the creation of previous works the researcher always uses the same symbols over and over again. Because it is felt that if the work created always uses the same symbol, the work will lack the wealth of symbols in conveying the message. This is where the question arises in the mind of the researcher, "what symbols can be used to represent a theme, especially in photographic work?". An idea emerged to research symbols in art

photography in the works of recognized artists and proven success in conveying messages through photography. In this study, the researcher will focus on a collection of works by the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, where his work has proven successful in conveying ideas on a problem. The researcher will focus on the collection because in this study the ultimate goal is the method of creating photographic works of art that use symbols to represent an idea. The symbols used in photographic works are very important because photography presents real works (based on

reality), so if you want to direct the viewer to the idea or problem that the artist wants, the artist must use symbols that are indeed significant to the idea being conveyed. The accuracy in choosing this symbol is the outline of this research.

## **2. Method**

This study seeks to describe the form of symbols in photographic works of art. Therefore, a qualitative analytical method with an approach to semiotics was chosen to be able to dissect the use of symbols as a representation of an idea in a work of art. Qualitative research is a process of research and understanding based on a methodology that investigates a social phenomenon and human problems (Cresswell, 1998:15).

The research stages include; Carrying out preparatory activities which include collecting library materials regarding the reading of symbols in works, especially art

photographs; Conducting studies on the forms of symbols presented by photographic artists who have been recognized in the world; Compile final reports and materials for presentation purposes; Final report improvement; Duplication of the final report; Carry out the handover of the results of the implementation of the work.

The location and scope of this research is limited to works of art photographs by artists who have been recognized as the main data whose contents are processed to obtain a method for selecting the use of symbols in it.

The most independent qualitative data collection methods of all data collection methods and data analysis techniques are literature studies, in-depth interviews, participatory observation, documentary materials, as well as new methods such as browsing material from the internet. In this case the object that the researcher chose was a work of art. Therefore, the research process will be further

strengthened in the study of literature, observation and documentation.

In this case the researcher explores literature that is related to the research topic and research object, which includes theory books, notes, journals, theses, or dissertations that are involved in the core of this research, as a reference, comparison and also the continuation of the research itself.

Observation in looking for original works that have been created by artists, whether found in the form of digital images or in the form of a work catalog at an exhibition.

Researchers record any findings in the field that are in accordance with the topic that can add clarity to research results.

This study discusses and analyzes the object under study based on the data and records obtained in order to get a clear picture in the form of a written work.

The data analysis technique in this study is descriptive content

analysis, because this analysis aims to obtain a form or method for creating works of art using appropriate symbols so that the ideas to be conveyed can be clearly accepted by the public.

**Components in data analysis:**

**Data reduction:** data obtained from the results of surgery through theoretical studies, will be reduced, summarized, selected main points that focus on the theme of this research.

**Presentation of data:** presentation of research data results can be written in sentences or short descriptions, charts, relationships between categories, and the like.

**Data verification or conclusion:** the initial conclusions put forward are still temporary, and will change if strong evidence is found, which will support the next stage. However, if the conclusions put forward at an early stage are supported by valid and consistent evidence, then the conclusions put forward are credible conclusions.

### 3. Analysis

Ross is an artist and a professor, though in every sense his work is framed by, and propelled forward with, the cause of social justice. His images (and teaching) have long provided access to invisible sights that regulate bodies through discipline and containment. His 2007 photographic body of work titled *Architecture of Authority* pictured schools, the corridors of mosques, meeting rooms in the U.N., segregation cells in Abu Ghraib and a capital-punishment death chamber. The images are bleak but arresting; their compositions and color palettes feel almost painterly.

Artists like Ross will be the first to tell you: for the “fine artist” who makes work that engages themes of social inequality, there emerges an interesting (and often productive) conflict. How does one navigate worlds that tend to not only be cut off, but also in fact negate one another? In

making art that operates within both commercial and nonprofit channels, Ross is sensitive to this potential discordance. Though he’s represented by a commercial gallery that sells his photographs as fine-art objects, Ross regularly licenses his pictures to socially progressive nonprofits and social-advocacy groups for free or at a nominal charge. In addition, he deliberately exhibits his work in university museums. “Where better to show the work,” he relates, “but amongst a younger generation who are themselves in the midst of learning about sociology, education, race and gender studies, journalism, political science, social work and law?” Real social reform, after all, comes from some measure of cooperation between all these fields.

For a contemporary audience, Richard Ross has followed the example of these earlier photographers by documenting problems in the justice system and juvenile

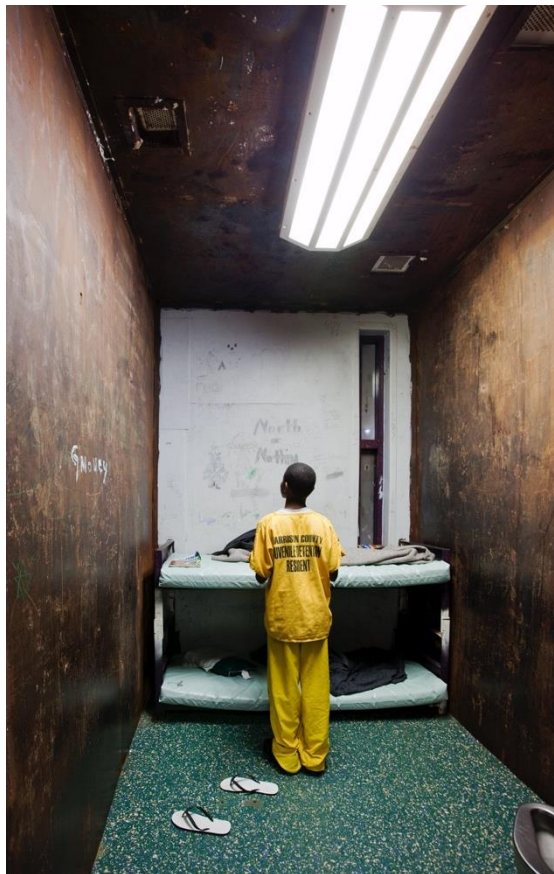
detention facilities in the United States. In this ongoing project, Ross has interviewed and photographed over 1,000 juveniles, thereby exposing the unjust and sometimes inhumane practices that currently take place in the system. Ross's project is presented in the multiple formats of a book, an exhibit and a website, all of which encourage the viewer to take action in this effort to improve the conditions in government holding facilities. The project is supported, in part, by the Annie E Casey Foundation, which is committed to the advancement of research and solutions to overcome issues that negatively affect children: poverty, unnecessary disconnection from family and communities with limited access to opportunity.

Before beginning the *Juvenile in Justice* project, Richard Ross was already an accomplished photographer, having published seven books and having received the 2007 Guggenheim Fellowship.

He used this fellowship to complete his seventh book, *Architecture of Authority*, in which he documented the characteristics of different spaces, photographing everything from schools to prisons. Ross's photography illustrates how these spaces are designed to exert a certain kind of control on the people who occupy them. Charles Goodsell also explored this observation in detail in *The Social Meaning of Civic Space*, in which he documented the architectural changes in city council chambers throughout the 20th century. Goodsell determined that changes in architecture were meant to give the idea that the citizens had more control over the governmental process, but these changes weren't reflective of meaningful changes in the government itself. Ross has continued this exploration of institutional control by documenting American juvenile detention facilities,

showing us some of the most noticeable ways in which architecture has been designed to influence the viewers psychological state.

In one of the works in the Juvenile-in-Justice series, there are several symbols that we can pay attention to and relate them to the social conditions in which this work was created. From there, we will find out what meaning the work can convey.



Picture 1. Juvenile-in-Justice Works

There is only one main object in the work above, namely a child who is standing facing the wall with his back to the camera. The subject in the picture is wearing a yellow shirt with an inscription explaining that the child is a prisoner in a minor prison. From the clothes he was wearing, it looked like they were still bright in color, not dull, and not too shabby. The signifier that can be taken from this symbol is that this child has recently been in custody.

In addition, the child's pose seems to be observing the room in front of him, which gives the impression that he is processing whatever writing is on the walls of the room he just occupied. From the pose, the subject strengthens the signifier stating that this child has recently occupied this room.

Also visible are the slippers leading to the main subject so we can assume they are hers, which are still very clean. This is once again a signifier reinforcing a

subject who only recently occupied this room.

The place settings in the work show several objects, namely: a stacked mattress, a pair of sandals, a small toilet in the lower right corner, several piles of clothes and blankets, as well as the atmosphere of space depicted on the walls, graffiti, lights and ventilation.

The signifier contained in the picture is a detention room, then if we start to enter the realm of meaning or the resulting signified, we can talk about more than just a detention room.

From the top it shows worn-out ventilation, almost all parts of the wall that have been drawn or crossed out by, perhaps, the previous occupants, there are also many parts of the wall that have been eroded, the paint has even been brittle in some small parts, the shape of the mattress, the mattress tends to be thin, too uneven again, clearly shows that this detention room is not well maintained.

Compositionally, the white wall becomes the second center of attention after the main subject wearing a yellow shirt. On the white wall there is a clearer picture than the other graffiti on other parts of the wall. Compositionally, this image is located in the middle of the work frame, so it is difficult for us to pass through it.

As a signifier, the picture on the wall is an alien with an airplane. In meaning or signified, the image represents an imaginative image of a small child. With the support of other signifiers, namely some harsh written sentences, so that they can bring up new signifiers that talk about the thoughts of minors who are disturbed or inappropriate at that age.

Now that sign emerges from the work of Richard Ross, we can take it even further. At the denotation level, Ross's work can convey what he is concerned about and conveys through several of his works, juvenile prison with an implementation



that is far from best practice. Because Ross's approach is documentary photography in which the work is done directly on the scene, so we cannot make a special connotation because it is clearly conveyed that the location shooting is directly done at the event that Ross wants to convey with a documentation approach, not setting the stage.

In addition to the work above, Ross also created 4 other works with different subjects and spaces to reinforce the ideas he wanted to convey. Also, to convey more clearly what procedures are deemed not in accordance with the ideal word for a juvenile prison.

#### **4. Conclusions**

After going through the analysis phase, it can be concluded that the work of Richard Ross is very good at selecting symbols. The author can conclude that the ideas he wants to convey based on the results of his long research can be conveyed well through his

work. So, it is true that the selection of symbols is one of the important things in the creation of works of art, especially photography, because symbols are one of the key introductions of ideas from artists to connoisseurs of works.

The advantage in photographic works with a documentation approach is that it is easy to convey what happened in that place directly without a lot of intermediary gestures or other symbols of meaning, but the difficulty is in determining the right framing so that the symbols that are already in the shooting location can be captured properly from the point of view of clearly visible as well as in terms of photographic composition.

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