Figure 1: Yongzhi Chu, Monkey training for a circus, 29 November 2014, Suzhou, Anhui Province, China

Figure 2: Yongzhi Chu, Monkey training for a circus, 29 November 2014, Suzhou, Anhui Province, China – edited by Koen Vanmechelen

One picture tells more than a thousand words

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One picture tells more than a thousand words. That can be true. The question however is what exactly it tells the viewer? Does it confirm his prejudices? And how do you quantify more? More of what? More truth? More depth? Does it give a more bird's perspective? What narrative does a picture weave?

When photography was first invented, its overwhelming power came from the fact that it recorded nature more realistically than any other art form had ever done before. Because of this, people trusted it and believed it portrayed "reality" and "truth".

But pictures contain data, just like any other bearer of meaning. In an age where the news is buzzing with rumors about fake news, we have known for decennia that also pictures can be falsified, can be fake and deceiving. They are edited, changed, used for a purpose. Digital manipulation is the name of the game and we are getting better at it every day. Even long before the digital age pictures were manipulated. Fairies were photographed, next to lake monsters, ghosts and UFO's.

Truth can be as much in a picture as in words, lies also. Facts and fiction are twin sisters. Discerning them from one another is not easy and often requires experts. Making a picture is not an objective recording or reality. Insofar as reality exists.

Basically, a picture tells us what we want to believe. It often needs words for the creation of a better, more reliable and more objective context. In the picture – a world press photo by Yongzhi Chu – and its manipulated version, you can see what we mean. In the first picture, we see a monkey looking frightened at a man approaching threateningly with a bullwhip. Why? And then our brain makes up a story with the element monkey, bike, whip, man. In the edited picture, the bullwhip has gone. Approaching the poor monkey who crashed his bike into a wall is a man wanting to help the animal. The need for help is reflected in the begging eyes of the monkey. Two radically different interpretations due to the omission of one photographed object.

Being an artist, I can easily draw a comparison with a work of art. Seeing is not seeing. What for some viewers is a urinal, is a highly provocative work of art for others. A chicken is for me much more than a feathered piece of meat. Seeing the beauty of the animal, the idiosyncrasy of each bird takes dedication and practice. Watching, observing but also seeing is much less easy than we think. The human being has been photoshopping as long as he exists.

Maybe a thousand words are needed to contextualize a picture and a picture is needed to sharpen the lens of the words. Pics and words are complementary. How accurate we need the reality they try to depict depends on the perspective of the viewer and his intent. Does he need facts, views or visions? Facts or fiction?

Without somekind of frame, everything becomes fluid.