



Invisibility In A Time Of Transparency, by Akiko Busch

What is the difference between being invisible and just landing in a blind spot?

In the woods no more than an hour, I am struck anew by invisibility, and its improvisational choreography, as a necessary condition of life. I am reminded of the grace of reticence, the power of discretion, and the possibility of being utterly private and autonomous yet deeply aware of and receptive to the world. If I am enchanted by staying out of sight, it is because such behavior seems so rare in our own species. In recent years, we have been more preoccupied than ever by the question of how to stay in view.

Yet we humans have our own diverse ways of being seen or unseen. We have our own metrics of invisibility, and our vision is a matter that goes beyond the electromagnetic spectrum. We make ourselves known or not, and familiarity, color blindness, and peripheral vision are the least of it. We have devised a vast catalog of inventive strategies — physical, psychological, technological — for how we maneuver our way in and out of one another's sight lines. They can be captivating, enchanting, deceptive, manipulative, hopeful, despairing, gracious, isolating, logical, illogical, strange, and altogether mysterious. This age of increasing transparency is time to consider them anew.

Visibility has become the common currency of our time, and the twin circumstances of social media and the surveillance economy have redefined the way we live. In his landmark 1979 book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch noted that "success in our society has to be ratified by publicity." Forty years later, our cult of transparency shows his prescience, as do the enabling new technologies. It has become routine to assume that the rewards of life are public and that our lives can be measured by how we are seen rather than what we do.

A new vocabulary has emerged for this visibility. The word optics now has to do less with the science of light and more with how visual impressions of events and issues may be more important than the events and issues themselves. In altering the flow of information, the technological revolution has also radically revised the way we present ourselves to the exterior world, and the novel phrase "curating identity" refers to the self-promotion, personal branding, and ability

to create and cultivate assorted profilesâ€”consumer, social, political, professionalâ€”on social media that are viewed as valued, indeed essential, commodities. [...]

When identity is derived from projecting an image in the public realm, something is lost, some core of identity diluted, some sense of authority or interiority sacrificed. It is time to question the false equivalency between not being seen and hiding. And time to reevaluate the merits of the inconspicuous life, to search out some antidote to continuous exposure, and to reconsider the value of going unseen, undetected, or overlooked in this new world. Might invisibility be regarded not simply as refuge, but as a condition with its own meaning and power?Â

Going unseen may be becoming a sign of decency and self-assurance. The impulse to escape notice is not about complacent isolation or senseless conformity, but about maintaining identity, propriety, autonomy, and voice. It is not about retreating from the digital world but about finding some genuine alternative to a life of perpetual display. It is not about mindless effacement but mindful awareness. Neither disgraceful nor discrediting, such obscurity can be vital to our very sense of being, a way of fitting in with the immediate social, cultural, or environmental landscape. Human endeavor can be something interior, private, and self-contained. We can gain, rather than suffer, from deep reserve.Â