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Objects of Affect: Photography Beyond the Image*

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Keywords

photographs, material culture, social relations, senses

Abstract

This review considers the impact and efficacy of material thinking in anthropological studies of photographs and photographic practices. Such analytical strategies have moved the analysis of photographs beyond that of the visual alone and illuminated the cultural work required of photographs. After reviewing key analytical positions of social biography, visual economy, and photography complex, I explore the material work of photographs through two registers: the idea of “placing”, in which photographs become active in assemblages of objects, and the processes of material repurposing and remediation of the humble ID photography. These strands are drawn together in the idea of a sensory photograph, entangled with orality, tactility, and haptic engagement. The article argues that photographs cannot be understood through visual content alone but through an embodied engagement with an affective object world, which is both constitutive of and constituted through social relations.

THE SHAPE OF THE QUESTION

In his essay on the material sign, Keane (2005) asks, "What do material things make possible?" (p. 191). I use this question as a springboard to consider the impact and efficacy of material thinking in anthropological studies of photography, photographs, and photographic practices: What does material thinking make possible? Central to this discussion are questions of what people do with photographs, or what "work" is expected of photographs as objects—in albums, on walls, at shrines, in political protest, as gift exchange. Under which material conditions are photographs seen? In which ways are they things that demand embodied responses and emotional affects?

This is a field of inquiry that has established itself strongly in the past two decades, with notable studies of both historical and contemporary photography in India, Indonesia, Vanuatu, and Australia for example (Pinney 1997, 2004, 2008; Lydon 2005; Deger 2006; Geismar 2009; Strassler 2010; Geismar & Herle 2010), all of which address the material and affective dynamics of photographs in some form or other. Although the emergence of such an approach has a longer history (see for instance Bourdieu 1965), it is no coincidence that the rise of a newly figured and newly theorized, Marxist-derived material culture studies in the 1970s and 1980s, which provided "a powerful critique of the role of objects in symbolic systems and social structures" (Buchli 2002, pp. 10–11), emerged at the same time as the increasing recognition of the work of photographs. Although the first engagements with photographs were in relation to anthropology's own history framed largely through a politics of representation and a disquiet with anthropology's own claims to authority (see Edwards 1992, 2011; Pinney 1992, 2011), of the anthropology of visual systems, and in particular of photographic practices, had emerged strongly by the 1990s (Banks & Morphy 1997, Poole 1997, Pinney & Peterson 2003). In their varying ways, such studies brought the material practices of photography into the center of the analysis. As part of that

broader material turn, anthropologists recognized the constitutive importance, agency, and affective qualities of things in social relations. These approaches placed the photographic image centrally within the complex relations between humans and nonhumans, people and things (Latour 2005). This position was complicated in intellectually important ways by the fact that photographs, especially in their global consumption, are often of people, thus blurring the distinction between person and thing, subject and object, photograph and referent in significant ways. These relations circumscribe the interlinked dynamics of the photograph's social use, material performance, and patterns of affect as they are put to work through their material substance (Belting 2011, p. 11).

This complex relationship is grounded in the laminated quality of the nature of photography itself and photographs as objects, and the consequent analytical positions on the circulation and use of, and engagement with, the material qualities and performances of photographs are premised on this lamination. Two key and related models have framed the field, models that continue to have resonance. First is that of social biography. Although this is something of an old war horse in material culture studies now, it nonetheless works as an effective tool in relation to photographs because photographs are objects specifically made to have social biographies. Their social efficacy is premised specifically on their shifting roles and meanings as they are projected into different spaces to do different things. Kopytoff's (1986) biographical model argued that objects cannot be understood through only one moment of their existence but are marked through successive moments of consumption across space and time.

Although taken up in relation to a wide range of cultural objects and institutions, such as museums, social biography provided a productive way of thinking about the lives of photographs. Pinney's *Camera Indica* (1997), on the social lives of Indian photographs, exemplifies this approach, concerning itself with the "concrete" circulations of photographs (p. 10). Edwards and others also applied this model to museum

collections to explore the institutionalization of anthropological photographs, for instance, the dynamics and material practices through which “touristic” photographs of “native types” could become “scientific” through acts of consumption, archiving, or the shifting apprehension of photographs as they were displayed in different institutional contexts (Edwards 2001, 2002; Boast et al. 2001; Kratz 2001; Edwards & Hart 2004a; Geismar 2006). It was also a model that could accommodate, intellectually, the increasing demands on photographs to become something else again through indigenous demands for access to and rights over photographs within repatriation projects and highly charged reclamations of history (Fienup-Riordan 1998; Edwards 2001; Bell 2003; Peers & Brown 2003; Brown & Peers 2006; Isaac 2007, pp. 116–18; Geismar & Herle 2010).

Although of course photographs can have lives and “come alive” (Knappet 2002, p. 98) in many ways, the biography model, while effective, is, however, perhaps too linear to accommodate the analytical needs of the complex flows of multiple originals of photographs. For photographs have divergent, nonlinear, social biographies spread over divergent multiple material originals and multiple, dispersed, and atomized performances. Nonetheless, it offered a way in which the temporal dynamics of photographs could be integrated with the potential of their materiality. The challenge in the material apprehension of photographs is for a model that can accommodate the double helix of the simultaneous existence of objects that are both singular and multiple.

A closely related model to that of social biography, but one more specifically photographic in its conception, and thus more able to accommodate that demand for multiplicity of lives over a number of dimensions, is that of visual economy. Developed by Poole in relation to the Peruvian Andes, this model presents an alternative to what Poole argues is the more static and leveling model of visual culture (Poole 1997). This latter approach, she argued, fails to account for asymmetries on which so much imaging practice is premised. Although

emerging strongly from a Foucauldian sense of the scopic regime and discursive practices of knowledge, visual economy was nonetheless a strongly material argument, based in the circulation of images. Poole placed the meaning of photographs not in content alone but in the fluid relationships between a photograph’s production, consumption, material forms, ownership, institutionalization, exchange, possession, and social accumulation, in which equal weight is given to content and use value.

If these two models have largely come to form the standard analytical framework for the photographic objects, a reformulation of the social and material work of photographs emerges in Hevia’s more recent model of “photography complex.” This model gives Poole’s visual economy a more expansive dimension (Hevia 2009). Taking a Latourian model, drawn from actor network theory, this model maintains that the social saliency of objects and their efficacy is activated by networks of humans and nonhumans, people and things. It not only accounts for the flow of photographs as material objects, but encompasses, and gives a more dynamic role to, the technologies and structures that give photographs meaning. The photography complex constitutes a “novel form of agency” (Hevia 2009, p. 81) in which sets of photographic relations and the complex purposes and practices that entangle the photographic image have the capacity to mobilize new material realities. Given the nature of photographs and their relationships with concepts of the past, of memory and more particularly anticipated memory, based in the photographic trace, such a model of material efficacy and affect promises to be especially productive. The network model places photographs in a fluid set of productive relationships that “link or enumerate disparate entities without making assumptions about level or hierarchy” (Strathern 1996, p. 522). Strathern argues that networks are socially expanded hybrids, and indeed hybrids are condensed networks. This concept would appear to work well with photographs and the inherently hybrid range of values, relationships, desires, ideologies, and representational strategies that are

Materiality: the physical and discursive condition of having material substance

mobilized and performed through the multiple material forms of the photograph.

However, Strathern also cautioned that networks might present endlessly proliferating hybrids intersecting with an inherently “fragile temporality” (1996, p. 523) in that networks are not stable entities. This position resonates with the recodable, repurposed, and remediated photograph, which functions ambiguously and sometimes precariously in shifting patterns of social use. Also pertinent in this connection is Gell’s model of the “distributed object.” The “distributed object,” created through different microhistorical trajectories, yet discursively united as a single object, is another useful framework (Gell 1998, pp. 221–23) because it opens the space for a divergent, nonlinear, social biography of photographs spread over divergent multiple material originals and multiple, dispersed, and atomized performances of photographic objects, which themselves initiate and act in social relations: “In the process [of viewing], photographs emerge as relational or *distributed objects* enmeshed within various networks of telling, seeing, and being, which extends beyond what a photograph’s surface visually displays and incorporates what is embodied in their materiality” (Bell 2008, pp. 124–25, emphasis in original). The meaning of photographs, material forms, and ideas of appropriateness shift through the double helix of image biography and the biography of material refiguration and remediation.

Underlying all these positions, as they relate to photographs, is the central ethnographic question, why do photographs as “things” matter for people? Mattering claims important territory in the debate about materiality, and its importance is a register of the shift from asking semiotic questions about how images signify to cultural and phenomenological questions about how things mean (Miller 1998, 2005; Deger 2006). Miller has argued that thinking about “how things matter” as opposed to signify brings things into relations with practices and experience, rather than, as signifying implies, a distanced analytical category that intellectualizes responses to objects. The question “why do

things matter?” is therefore a way of allowing space for the subjective and, as we shall see, it is a crucial one in the consideration of the huge social and cultural investment made in the possibilities of photographs. “Mattering” has, he argues, “a more diffused, almost sentimental, association that is more likely to lead us to the concerns of those being studied than those doing the studying” (Miller 1998, pp. 3, 11). This notion might be linked, as Pinney has done, with Lyotard’s “figure,” which “invokes a field of active intensity,” a “zone where ‘intensities are felt’” (Pinney 2005, p. 266). Here materiality itself becomes a form of “figural excess,” which cannot be encompassed within linguistic and semiotic practices alone. Such approaches place photographs in subjective and emotional registers that cannot be reduced to the visual apprehension of an image. The stories told with and around photographs, the image held in the hand, features delineated through the touch of the finger, an object passed around, a digital image printed and put in a frame and carefully placed, dusted, and cared for, are key registers through which photographic meanings are negotiated.

However, in the pursuit of the analytical potential of the photograph’s materiality it is important not to collapse into a dichotomous model that separates systems of abstract signs of semiotic approaches from material forms, because, of course, material properties are themselves signifying properties. As Keane (2005) has demonstrated, the material does not preclude the signifying energies of photographs, but rather challenges the “radical separation of the sign from the material world to open the possibility of a better understanding of “the historicity *inherent* to signs *in their very materiality*” as signs exist within the “material world of consequences” [Keane 2005, p. 183 (emphasis in original), p. 186]. In thinking about photographs materially, Keane’s work, though not on photography as such, suggests nonetheless a fertile analytical ground in arguing that the semiotic signs must be understood not only as a mode of communicating abstract, linguistically framed, meaning, but as signs that

function “within a material world of consequences” in which materiality is not merely an element in the way that the sign is interpreted by its ‘reader’ but that it “gives rise to and transforms modalities of action and subjectivity *regardless* of whether they are interpreted” (Keane 2005, p. 186, emphasis in original). Photographs behave precisely in this way.

Having outlined the theoretical and analytical landscape, I want now to address more specifically the ways in which material approaches to photographs have enriched the anthropological understanding of these ubiquitous objects. As I have suggested, these analytical positions constitute an overall unease with the dominant understandings of photographs in iconographical, semiotic, and linguistic models of photographic meaning. Although this unease has a strong interdisciplinary character, for instance in the work of Bal and of Mitchell who have argued for the multisensory and agentic nature of the visual image (Bal 2003, Mitchell 2005), the formative ethnographic tradition of anthropology has both grounded and demonstrated the methodological and theoretical potential of material approaches to photography, a position that has become increasingly pertinent in the context of the inexorable spread of global media (Ginsberg et al. 2002, Pinney & Peterson 2003).

MATERIAL PRACTICES

The potential range of material practices and material objects that comprises the category “photographs” is massive. Photographs exist as contact prints, enlargements, postcards, lantern slides, or transparencies, for example. They exist as professional formats, snapshots, art works, or the products of bazaar and street photographers. They are glossy or matte, black and white, colored or hand-tinted. They are collaged, overpainted, cropped, framed and reframed, placed in albums, hung on walls, kept in secret places, written on, exchanged, and sometimes destroyed or defaced in an act of self-conscious violence (Batchen 2004, Edwards & Hart 2004b). They are sung to, danced with, paraded, and placed on religious

objects in assemblages of affect (see, for example, Peterson 1985, Edwards 1999, Brown & Peers 2006, Deger 2006, Van Dijck 2007, Vokes 2008, Empson 2011). They are joined now by a whole range of digital images (which are not in the strictest sense “photographs” but are popularly described as such). These aspects are beyond the scope of this review; however, digital images are enmeshed in a range of material practices and formations that both fulfill and exceed the social practices of analog photographs (Van Dijck 2007, Rose 2010). Furthermore, photographs, as objects defined in part by their reproducibility and potential repurposing, are objects with active biographies in a constant state of flux. They are reframed, replaced, rearranged; negatives become prints, prints become lantern slides or postcards, ID photographs become family treasures, private photographs become archives, analog objects become electronic digital code, private images become public property, and photographs of scientific production are reclaimed as cultural heritage (Bell 2003, Edwards 2003, Brown & Peers 2006, Geismar 2006, Geismar & Herle 2010, Strassler 2010).

A major anthropological contribution to thinking on photographs and photography more generally has been through its engagement with the social saliency of the photograph’s material significance. Anthropology has produced ethnographically grounded accounts of photography as an everyday phenomenology of the photographic object, considered in conjunction with a careful attention to the photograph’s ontology. This work has constituted an anthropological decentering of the normative assumption about the nature of photographs and has challenged and complicated the dominant categories of Western photographic analysis: realism, referent, trace, index, icon, and the power of representation. For instance, in some popular practices in India the “reality” effect of a photograph is not located in the indexical trace of the image itself but in the way an imagined and dreamlike self is constructed through additive techniques of overpainting and collaging, practices that have strong parallels in West

Index: In photographic theory “index” describes the relationship between a photograph and its subject, the former pointing to the latter

Africa (Pinney 1997; Wendl & Behrend 1998; Haney 2010, pp. 126–50). Such work points to the provincial nature of Eurocentric notions of photography (Pinney & Peterson 2003, Wright 2004) and demonstrates the inseparability of social practices, material practices, and imaging practices, as material forms are used to expand, enhance, and cohere the image content itself.

I explore briefly two interconnected elements of the material practices of photography, which have marked the anthropological literature in different ways. In both, the material qualities of photographs are laden with signifying properties and demonstrate the ways in which photographs are put to work in social relations. First is the idea of “placing.” I use this term to mean the work of a photographic object in social space through which questions of materiality, adjacency, assemblage, and embodied relations frame the meaning of the image. Second, to consider the material conditions of photographs themselves, I consider the remediation and repurposing of photographic images: the material translation of a photograph from one kind of object to another, and from one purpose to another. My example is the ubiquitous ID card photograph because it exemplifies the complex double helix of a photograph’s material biography. In the following section I then consider the embodied and sensory encounters with the photographic image implied by both these performances of photographs: placing and remediation.

Material culture studies have stressed the importance of the spatial dynamics of objects. The placing of photographs as objects in an assemblage of other objects and spaces is integral to the work asked of photographs and human relations with them. Placing is defined as a sense of appropriateness of particular material forms to particular sets of social expectation and desire within space and time. Such ideas of appropriateness and affordance in material forms saturate the ethnographies of photographic practice. As Drazin & Frohlich (2007) argue in their analysis of the practices of family photographs in British homes, photographs “demand of us that they be treated right”;

that is, there is a sense of “morally correct” material practices around photographs (pp. 51, 54). This notion relates to Rose’s concept of “affordances” and to Goffman’s notion of “appropriateness”—the culturally determined accordance of content, genre, and material performance, in that the social work of photographs as material objects allows for them to be treated only in certain ways (Rose 2010).

Appropriateness is often articulated through material forms and additive material interventions in relation to the image itself, such as overpainting or collaging. But these material interventions are activated through the placing of photographs appropriately into wider assemblages. The processes is well demonstrated in Empson’s (2011) study of the photomontages developed by Buriad nomads in Mongolia. These photographic constructions are carefully placed, both within the frame itself and within the broader assemblages of domestic space. Assemblages of images, often arranged to express kin links and social networks, are placed for display on the household chest, where “items of wealth and prestige are deliberately displayed on the chest’s surface” and visitors are invited to admire and to touch (Empson 2011, p. 117). The placing exactly replicates that of the shamanistic ancestral figures of pre-Soviet days (p. 125). Through placing, the photograph becomes a statement of its social importance and efficacy because it carries too a sense of the placing of the image within social relations. Photographs are used to cohere both kin and other relations through practices of adjacency and exchange. Photographs to be “treated right” must be in the “right place” and with the “right people,” in that inappropriateness of forms and treatment can perhaps have serious consequences. For conversely, in many instances a “misplacing” or “mistreatment” of the image risks the potential for witchcraft and inappropriate or undesired control; Behrend describes, for instance, the connection between witchcraft and the material destruction of photographs in Uganda (Behrend 2003).

Viewing photographs demands a certain form of behavior and etiquette in how images

are both viewed and managed. For instance, Empson (2011) notes how “[d]ifferent images are . . . displayed at different seasonal places, allowing for change and adaption according to different needs” (p. 132). In another example, Vokes has explored ways in which albums are developed in the final months of the life of AIDS victims in Uganda (Vokes 2008). These albums carry sets of social relations and intersubjectivities. They are carefully crafted self-conscious “biographical objects” through which stories can be told (Hoskins 1998)—statements of self and experience, intended as image-objects that will outlive their makers. These albums are affective objects because they are conceived of as, on the one hand, objects with a cathartic affect for the bereaved, and on the other, they “confer upon the deceased a particularly effective on-going ‘presence’ and ‘agency’ in the lives of the living” as an indistinguishable “life-form,” articulated through the material object (Vokes 2008, p. 361). As is often so in the case of albums, to fulfill their social role, the albums must be in the right hands, both literally and metaphorically.

Questions of identity and the social agency of photographs bring me to the second example I consider. As I have suggested, photographs are called on to do their work in a multiplicity of ways, and these serial demands of repurposing carry an implicit requirement for remediation or re-placing. The material performance of images over space and time is amply demonstrated by one of the most widespread photographic forms but also one of the most widely appropriated and remediated: the humble and ubiquitous ID card photograph. ID cards photographs, as instrumental visual forms, are associated with the definition, registration, and control of the civil identity by the state, from everyday banal state management to the loathed and contested passbooks in apartheid South Africa. But as a highly normalized and accessible visual form, ID card photography has had a major quantitative and qualitative impact on photographic practices and practices of visual consumption globally, part of the social, economic, and commercial processes

and networks through which images are obtained.

ID photographs are a form found extensively in photographic montages and albums, because they remain, for many people, the only access to photographs and photographic memorialization. For instance, a number of anthropologists have noted the way in which ID cards are cut up on the death of its holder to retrieve the photograph, often the only one in existence, as a memorializing object within the family and household. Unlike the replaceable and reproducible object of Western assumption, the photographic print becomes a precious object that carries a direct physical connection with the deceased. In such uses, the role of the ID card photography is realized not necessarily through remediation of the image itself into another format through its reproducibility, but through the removal of what is perceived as a unique photographic object into other social uses.

Whatever the precise processes through which new uses are achieved, ID card photographs famously fit Sekula’s notion of “repressive” as opposed to “honorific” portraiture (Sekula 1992, p. 345). Although photographs have always encompassed a dual possibility between the poles of repressive and honorific, what is significant is the way in which the repurposing of photographs into newly desired functions is effected by material practices such as enlargement, overpainting, recoloring, framing, reframing, photocopying, juxtaposing, pasting into albums, collaging, or transformation into objects of political confrontation (Pinney 1997; Werner 2001; Noble 2009, pp. 68, 70). These material processes shape the signifying possibilities of the photograph and allow the image to be “transposed from one realm of significance to another” (Strassler 2010, p. 27), from the state management of its citizens to the world of affect and intimate social relations, and from public to private realms. As such ID photographs demonstrate the way in which photographs are revalorized and reimagined, and new identities and sets of connection forged, through material practices that mobilize content in different ways. These

Haptic: while used primarily of touch, in visual theory it is used to imply a wider multisensory embodied perception

practices “demonstrate how the state’s gaze is both extended and refigured as it seeps into popular ‘ways of seeing’” (Strassler 2010, p. 147), while at the same time changes in state regulations around ID cards, from black and white to color for instance, inflect the way in which those seepages work (Werner 2001; Zeitlyn 2010, p. 454).

Such processes are not, of course, confined to ID cards, but the radical shifts in meaning and the reinstrumentalizing that accompanies the repurposing and remediation of these photographs and the claims made of them highlight the process of a material, visual economy and social biography, the analysis of which has shaped so much anthropological work.

THE SENSORY PHOTOGRAPH

What is clear from these examples is that the understanding of photographs cannot be contained in the relation between the visual and its material support but rather through an expanded sensory realm of the social in which photographs are put to work. The shifts from meaning alone to mattering and from content to social process are integral to material approaches to photographs and have demanded an analytical approach that acknowledges the plurality of modes of experience of the photograph as tactile, sensory things that exist in time and space and are constituted by and through social relations.

Emerging from debates on materiality and those around the primacy of vision, especially in cross-cultural environments, there has been an increasing analytical interest in photography as a phenomenologically and sensorially integrated medium, embodied and experienced by both its makers and its users. It is a position that emerges from a confluence of work that, on the one hand, challenges the assumed hierarchy of the senses and the primacy of vision, positioned in a broader notion of sensory scholarship (Feld 1990, Stoller 1997, Howes 2003) and, on the other, phenomenological approaches to the work of affect in the apprehension of objects. The idea of photographs as agentic objects that elicit affect has its roots in Gell’s analysis

of the art object but is heavily inflected with ideas from phenomenological anthropology concerned with embodied constructions and negotiation of experience—a “being in the world” (Feld 1990, Csordas 1994, Jackson 1996, Ingold 2011). The development of these ideas has progressed within the emerging debate on materiality. What Keane has described as “bundled” signifying qualities are also affective qualities, hence efficacy of their signifying properties as the bundling of sensory and material affects in which an object is defined through the copresence of the visual with other qualities—such as texture, weight, or size—which invite tactility, gesture, and embodied apprehension (Keane 2005, p. 188).

These arguments have provided a fertile ground from which to consider how photographs are made to mean in relation to social actions across a range of sensory experience and in which different perceptual situations demand different sensual configurations, composed of sound, gesture, touch, language, song, and haptic relations. These arguments insist on a sense of the relationship between the body and the photographic images, how users position themselves in relation to photographic images, how they view, handle, wear, and move with photographic images and perform a sense of appropriateness through relationships with the photographic image (Harris 2004, Brown & Peers 2006). Pinney (2001), concerned to reinstitute the analytical significance and weight of performative embodiment within the everyday usage of images, and in “understanding photographs” in particular, has helped the theoretical formulation of this position. In an essay, itself a response to Gell’s work, Pinney (2001) developed the term “corpothetics” as “the sensory embrace of images, the bodily engagement that most people... have with artworks.” This position indicates not a lack in images but a rich and complex praxis through which people articulate their eyes and their bodies in relation to pictures (pp. 158, 160–61).

Similar ideas of the relation to the multisensory nature of images have been argued too in art history and visual culture studies. Mitchell

(2005) has argued that there are no “visual media” as such, rather that “all media are, from the standpoint of sensory modality, ‘mixed media’” (p. 257). Instead he presents images as “braided,” in that “one sensory channel or semiotic function is woven together with another more or less seamlessly” (p. 262). Likewise Bal (2003) had pointed out the absurdity of an essentialized or pure form of “the visual”: “The act of looking is profoundly ‘impure’. . . . [T]his impure quality is also . . . applicable to other sense-based activities: listening, reading, tasting, smelling. This impurity makes such activities mutually permeable, so that listening and reading can also have visuality to them” (p. 9). Fundamental to these models is the acknowledgment that in the apprehension of the visual, one sensation is often integrally related to, and followed by, another to form continuous patterns of experience, representing a dense social embedding of an object.

Consequently, there has been, as Taussig (1993) has argued, a rethinking of vision in relation to other sensory modalities. The relationship between orality and sound has been a particularly important strand in thinking about photographs and one that has been gathering with increasing force within anthropology. This is especially so in work of “visual repatriation” and the articulation of histories, as people use the material forms of photographs as foci for telling stories and claiming histories, singing, and chanting (Poignant 1996, Brown & Peers 2006, Edwards 2006). As anthropological studies, they have addressed the role of photographs in the processes of identity, history, and memory. What are the material and affective performances through which photographs might become a form of history or engagement with, and reclamation, of the past (see, for instance, Fienup-Riordan 1998, Bell 2003, Brown & Peers 2006, Geismar & Herle 2010)? These studies have revealed a range of cultural responses to the ontological insistence of photographs—that “it was there”—an “ectoplasm of ‘what-had-been’” (Barthes 1984, p. 87). The apprehension of photographs in these contexts is premised on the content of

the image (MacDonald 2003; Smith 2003; Wright 2004; Deger 2006; Edwards 2006; Bell 2008, 2010; Vokes 2008; Strassler 2010). This is not, however, necessarily simply a verbalized forensic description of the content, but more importantly a talking with and talking to photographs in which photographs become interlocutors. Photographs connect to life as experienced, to “images, feelings, sentiments, desires and meanings,” but they also have the potential for “a process of enactment and rhetorical assertion” and as “nodes where various discourses temporarily intersect in particular ways” (Hoskins 1998, p. 6).

Many studies have focused, for instance, on the key relations between photographs, their place in the negotiation of relations between the past and the present, the living and the dead, the spirit world and the future (Wright 2004, Deger 2006, Smith & Vokes 2008), and the powerful connection between the photographic object, as a relic held in the hand and the physical connection to the subject. Halvaksz (2010), for example, has shown how for the Biangai people in Papua New Guinea, multiple social identities, the living and the dead, are folded into the very materiality of photographs, as photographs render the ancestors literally coeval with the living. What this example demonstrates is another aspect that has informed thinking about photographs, and their social efficacy: the photograph as a form of partible self. This notion draws on the work of anthropologists such as Strathern in which individuals are made up of different composite and divisible relations. Photographs are thus not merely surrogates for the absent, but powerful actants in social space “intertwined with a larger process of maintaining different forms of sociality and personhood” (Empson 2011, p. 109).

The detailed ethnographies of photographic use also give us a clear sense of the way in which photographs are absorbed into other forms and practices of narration. Photographs are seldom talked about without being touched, stroked, kissed, clasped, and integrated into a range of gestures. Furthermore, the flow of narration and the handling of photographs, as they are

passed around, is often determined by culturally specific hierarchies of authority, knowledge, and the right to speak, notably in kin groups, age sets, or gender divisions (Niessen 1991, Poignant 1992, Bell 2003). As such, photographs become important parts of the processes through which community coherence is articulated (Brown & Peers 2006). One example is the way in which photographs work in a number of Australian aboriginal communities, themselves dispersed through attenuated kinship ties and urban migration (Poignant 1996; Smith 2003, p. 20; Deger 2006). In such contexts, the performances of narrated photographs are demonstrated in how photographs become embodied within social relations as active constituents of social networks. Photographs move as tactile objects around groups of people. It is again in these contexts that the work of Gell on the agency of objects has focused on the ways in which objects, here photographs, elicit both effect and affect, as things that, with echoes of Latour, are integrally constitutive of and constituted through social processes. Its application to photographs intersects with the ontology of the photographic image itself in a multisensory mediation in experience in which sensory effects are social effects.

However, it is important to note here too that although the literature often equates orality with the spoken voice and narration (for example, Langford 2001), in understanding the use and impact of photographs' narrative environments, paralinguistic sounds—sobbing, sighing, laughing—are of major communicative importance, just as the silences are filled with gesture and touch (Edwards 2006). The crucial point of these ethnographies is that photographic meaning is made through a confluence of sensory experience, in which the visual is only a part of the efficacy of the image. This notion is powerfully demonstrated by an instance when a decayed, much handled photograph, worn away by touch, handed to Chris Wright in the Solomon Islands was still seen as being of someone and treasured as such, long after the material decay of the photograph had rendered it illegible (Wright 2007).

Finally, these sensory responses to photographs are integrally related to questions of placing, discussed above, because the placing of photographs and bodily interactions with them demand specific sets of relations (Hanganu 2004; Pinney 2004; Wright 2004, p. 81; Parrott 2009). The haptics of placing and adjacency are significant in more than just the domestic space, however. They are equally pertinent as forms of political embodiment, such as demonstrated in the parading of photographs or the public defilement of photographs in protest (Strassler 2010). Such engagements with the laminated photographic object are part of a larger photographic claim to citizenship and political power (for an extended discussion of such issues, see Azoulay 2008). For instance, resonating with Pinney's concept of "corporetics," Harris has described the ways in which Tibetans slept with the soles of their feet pointing at photographic portraits of Mao Tse Tung (often themselves heavily materially mediated by overpainting), constituting a major insult (Harris 2004), whereas Strassler describes a haptically experienced landscape of images that developed in Indonesia in the political protests of the 1990s. This included the Outdoor Exhibition in which students produced a moving exhibition of held, framed photographs of protest and violence, which was processed in the streets, and the pictures were held up in moments of stillness within the procession (Strassler 2010, pp. 246–47).

CLOSING THOUGHTS

All these processes render photographs profoundly social objects of agency that cannot be understood outside the social conditions of the material existence of their social function—the work that they do. The ideas outlined here have been engaged with over a wide range of socio-photographic practices. Importantly, some of these practices are not, on the surface, primarily "photographic"; rather they demonstrate the way that photographs, their material forms, and their social purposes play through a range of practices and concepts such as elegance,

social exchange, and of course, memorialization (Buckley 2000/2001, 2006; Drazin & Frohlich 2007). For instance, Buckley traces the complex relationship between photographs and their social uses, concepts of elegance and modernity, and what he describes as “the aesthetics of citizenship,” which are performed through sets of relationships between the colonial and postcolonial imaging practices in The Gambia (Buckley 2006). He also suggests ways in which anthropological studies of photographic practices can illuminate not only the practices of photography itself. They can also furnish ways through which material and sensory approaches to photographs might illuminate other broader anthropological questions, for instance religious experience (Klima 2002), ideas of modern identity (Hirsch 2004, Buckley 2006), or claims to sovereignty, cultural property, and land (Bell 2003, Harris 2004, Brown & Peers 2006).

What all this work does is bring a theory of effects into the center of the understanding of photographs and displace the analytical dominance of looking at the image alone. This practice does not, of course, invalidate or elide the content of the image. Indeed the content of the image must remain at the center because it is the basis through which photographs are understood. But what the material turn in visual anthropology has also made possible, to return to Keane’s question with which I started, is the way in which those understandings are materially grounded in the experience of the world as users of photographic objects, not simply viewers of images. Arguably too, the ethnographic density now emerging in photographic studies in anthropology presents an opportunity to rethink the theoretical tools through which photographs and photography might be understood more broadly.

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