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## Photo-objects

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This essay is intended to suggest ways in which we might shift thinking about still photography (especially, but not exclusively, historical material) in anthropology beyond concerns with content as such, and towards an anthropology of the social and cultural use of photographs. While clearly not denying the informational qualities of photographs, this view maintains that photographs are not *only* 'of' things in document terms, although clearly this remains a defining characteristic and a major focus of their interest to anthropologists. Rather I shall argue that they are equally cultural *objects* in their own right with all the complexities of form, function and meaning of other kinds of material culture. Indeed arguably they are more complex because they have meanings as objects and meanings as images, and both sets of meanings which are inextricably linked, for it is not only the image which is a direct product of intention, but the *object* as well.

Much valuable work has been done on historical images in anthropology (for example Theye, 1989; Edwards, 1992 & Blanchard et al, 1995 and essays therein) but the evidential, the content, has been remained dominant. Such work has been concerned with the document status of photographs, within, for example, the politics of representation, where the way in which

images affirm and sustain ideas of race and culture has been examined. Such analysis has focused on the veracity, authenticity, equity and 'justice' of the image *content*, refracted through the act of photography and the nature of encounter. Similarly work has been concerned with hidden histories, which while they reached out beyond the surface content of the photograph into the 'silences' which surround it, the focus is again ultimately on content. Even debates about phenomenology and semiotics of the image are centred on content and its relationship with perception and the physical world and its coding, detaching the photograph from its *material* form.

As I have suggested, theoretical debates on meaning in photographic discourse has largely overlooked the very plasticity of the image object. There has been some work in this latter direction. Pierre Bourdieu pointed the way many years ago with his examination of the social uses of photography and the social meanings within the act of photographing and technology of photography (Bourdieu, 1965). Work on family albums (for example Hirsch, 1981; Holland and Spence, 1991; Kuhn, 1995) the display of photographic images in domestic and public spaces (Baker, work in progress), on the cross cultural expectancies of photography (Poignant, 1997;

Isaac, work in progress), are all part of this movement but it remains, for all this good work, one which has yet to make a marked impression on visual anthropology as a sub-discipline. Thus while much work has been done on social use and meaning of photographs as a broader discursive practice of power relations, gender relations, the perpetuation of stereotypes and so forth (for example Faris, 1996), Nicholas Thomas' call for precise historical studies of specific colonialisms (1994) could be echoed in a call for precise historical studies of specific photographs within specific societies. Some fine case studies are emerging in history of photography in general, for instance Elizabeth Anne McCauley brilliant analysis of commercial photography in Paris during the Second Empire (1995), which examines the photographer as a tradesman, responding to market forces which in their turn are driven by cultural expectations of photography. However, specific *ethnographies* of photography are remain few in number despite the crucial questions which surround the cultural use of photographs. How are images used in social space? What is displayed? Where? What is hidden – in diaries, family bibles for instance? How do these link with performative material culture with which they are linked such as frames, wallets, and albums?

Consequently, I want to suggest two linked strategies of thinking about photographs. First, the photograph as object and second, the idea of ethnography of photography. I am going to consider them as they operate within museums and exhibitions, although clearly such an approach has a very much wider relevance and application. Finally, I shall consider briefly ways in which these two linked approaches, might inform museum practice in terms of the the curatorship of photographs within museums of anthropology and cultural or social history. The fundamental shift for which I am arguing, moves towards thinking about photographs as cultural objects in their own right and signals a shift away from the 'picture-library mentality' towards

a 'material culture mentality'. This concern for the object is *not*, I stress, an aestheticism in art terms nor is it a collapse into modernism where the medium and formal qualities of the object are the message, the very thing which post-modernist and post-colonial thinking has wished to subvert. However, possibly the profound distrust of centring of medium, because of its inherent modernist suggestions, has mitigated against a material culture approach to photographs. I am arguing instead a recentring of the materiality of the image which reaches out to the affective tone, subjective and sensuous experiences of the image as cultural object<sup>1</sup>.

Running through my discussion are the notions of genre, expectancy and performance, concepts more usual in the analysis of oral histories than in visual histories (see Tonkin, 1992). I cannot explore them here in a short essay but in brief, genre and performance are circumscribed by expectancy. They are strongly linked to function: what are the appropriate photographic styles, object forms, for what is expected of performance of photography in a given context?

The photograph as a culture object, operates at the nexus of function, form and meaning in the full range of its materiality and physicality<sup>2</sup>. In this context the medium makes visible the means of translation and the physical manifestations and significances of that translation. This involves a consideration not only of the content of the image – asking ethnographic questions – but also photographic questions which interrogate not merely the technology, although this can be revealing of ethnographic intent<sup>3</sup>, but the object resulting from photographic action – the photographic print, its reproductions and disseminations. Thus it might be argued that it is through an analytical engagement with materiality, form and meaning related to social function and cultural use, that photographic engagement and thus meaning is established. As material objects, photographs collapse iconographic form, content and material form into a series of certain cultural expectations of the function of the

object, which in the case the photographs of individuals, threatens the presumed dualisms between object and person, in a way which goes beyond the categories of image and referent.

Further it is the materiality of the photographic image as used, which sets it apart from film or video. Certainly, through it, image it becomes a surrogate object or linking object, as Barthes explored so eloquently on contemplating a photograph of his recently dead mother (1984). But the photograph remains nonetheless a physical object to which meaning is attached. The strength of social meaning can be gauged by the treatment of photographs, and the violence done to them on occasion. They are also precious objects kept in family bibles, displayed in homes, in cars, hidden under pillows, arranged in albums, circulated as 'memory texts' (Lewis & Harding, 1992; Kuhn, 1995). The trauma of suppressing this function of object is illustrated by instances of Kurdish people burying their photographs in tins on the hillside, precisely to loose that very memory and identity which photographs and photographic objects bestow, to suppress history in the face of assaults to the Iraqi forces (Meiselas, 1997). The forms in which images are displayed and used follows their function, linked to this is a cultural expectancy of physical form and cultural function working together. Which photographs are enlarged, displayed as public faces, which remain small private worlds?

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I have just outlined a broad picture of the cultural uses of photography which might be usefully addressed. Museums have their own agendas and problems. Within ethnography museums and exhibitions I would argue that the expectancy of photographic performance in has long been grounded in the tacit collaboration between curators and audience to maintain an expectancy informed by positivist and realist ideas of photography, applied uncritically to illustrate and explain. The political and ethical issues of representation which have dominated the debate over

ethnographic museums over the last couple of decades have made such a position untenable, yet despite this it persists in many curators minds and certainly those of the museum visitor.

The didactic functions of photographs are integral to the construction of the political economy of meaning in the ethnographic museum, explaining and re-presenting, directly fixing meanings to be constructed and maintained (Greenberg, 1996, p. 2). Photographs have been used to show how this or that 'works' 'is used' 'made', photographs are seen as providing context, they explain, authenticate. On occasion photographs substitute for the 'real object' actually blurring the object/image distinction, for instance in the case of partially complete bridewealth banner from the Highlands of New Guinea in the Museum of Mankind's exhibition 'Paradise: Continuity and Change in the New Guinea Highlands' (Clifford, 1997, pp. 159-160) but it is the completeness or veracity of the object which is in doubt, the photographs remain resolutely realist in their statement 'This is how it was', the possible ambiguity of the photograph is concealed. Sometimes photographs are used as a 'course semiotic': present equals colour, recent past equals black and white, or more remote past equals sepia. Alternatively they are used as establishing mechanisms to create the total environment in the re-representation of a people or place. There is certainly a place for such explanatory strategies and the use of images to create a sense of visual environment, ambience and affective tone of a given place to which the visitor would not necessarily have access in any other way, after all this was often the photographer's intention in making such images. However in intellectual terms such a use is nonetheless premised on the acceptance of the realist nature of photography, photograph as instant gratification and total explanation as the nexus of vision, perception and knowledge. I am not arguing that there is a simplistic acceptance of images, but that a nexus of genre (realism as a cultural category of seeing), expectancy and performance of the images in

the didactic space of the museum brings a range of possible responses to an image within hierarchies of truth and foreclosing on other possibilities<sup>4</sup>.

The traditional functions of the photograph in Museums suppress not only the nature of the photographic medium both in theoretical terms, but also the historical specifics and asymmetrical relational dynamics of their making and the forms of their dissemination. Further the object-dominated discourses of the museum require an order that elevates object and subjugates photograph and its specific voice in a given space, to the extent that the latter can be lifted promiscuously to make an object 'mean' in contexts delineated by the object, not the photograph. The photograph is rarely on object itself<sup>5</sup>. The medium of photography becomes invisible, an unmediated window on the world, a neutral rectangular piece of paper undocumented beyond surface content, placed beside the material certainties of objects (Porter, 1989, p. 24). Furthermore images are often juxtaposed in museum displays in a very disturbing way, privileging content but blind to the elements of photographic practice which structure them. Such an instance is the Life-Cycle Gallery at the Museum of Religious Life in Glasgow, Scotland which is, as the name suggests, a cross-cultural exploration of life cycle and associated rites-de-passage. The images used in the gallery were chosen for their content to make the displays 'more alive and peopled' (Lovelace, 1995, p. 68). There does not appear to be any engagement photographically, either with the formats of the photographic prints or the tensions between form and content within the image. One instance is a photograph of a bride by the distinguished documentary photographer Eve Arnold. Specific elements of the photograph, such as energising framing of the image, construct meaning through the tensions of form and content, enhanced by a framed large format print of fine quality<sup>6</sup>. It sits uncomfortably, both formally and technically, with the didactic images which surround it, most of which

are photographically naive and printed small, as if to stress the secondary and supporting nature of the image, the photograph having no dynamic of its own. In this way photographs are used to give the appearance of history rather than 'historical writing', an entirety or holistic vision rather than an arrangement (Porter, 1989, p. 24). A more material culture based approach would reveal rather than conceal the different categories of image which are so disruptive at Glasgow, through making their photographicness explicit and thus the way in which social meanings gather round the interplay of content, form, format and function.

The general position I have outlined suggests the potential riches of looking at the photographic object not only in terms of content but as material culture. I want to turn now to a specific exhibition as an example in which the objectness or the material culture of the photograph has been central. I hope it illustrates some of the points I have been making.

In the summer of 1995 an exhibition of nineteenth and early twentieth century photographs of Samoa, entitled 'Picturing Paradise: Colonial Photography in Samoa 1875-1925' received its only British showing at Pitt Rivers Museum. The exhibition was the product of a German-American collaboration between the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum für Völkerkunde in Cologne (Köln) and the Southeast Museum of Photography in Florida (see Engelhard and Mesenhöller, 1995; Blanton, 1995). It was shown in four very different venues, four different kinds of institutions, in Cologne, in Oxford, in Florida and in New York with very different results. I am concerned here with the exhibition as I interpreted it in Oxford because I approached it very much as an ethnography of photographic production and consumption<sup>7</sup>.

The exhibition looked at the creation, substantiation and continuation of western notions of the south Pacific in general and Samoa in particular through photography. The exhibition was divided into broad sections, first modern per-

ceptions of Samoa, including tourist brochures, and stereotypical advertisements of generic 'South Sea Dancers' and similar, tourist postcard, small toys and so forth. This was followed by sections on the colonial presence in Samoa in the late nineteenth century, the sources of images – science, missions, travellers, the recontextualisation and dissemination of images including a section called 'Samoa by Your Own Fireside' which looked at the formats of popular consumption of images of Samoa such as stereographic cards, souvenir leaflets from travels and international exhibitions, popular magazines and so forth.

While the content was central to this in that it performed the cultural tropes, especially those of soft primitivism traditionally associated with the area such as the 'Noble Savage' and the 'Colonial Venus' (both of which formed sections), it was more concerned with the reproduction, dissemination and consumption of these images in which photographic artifacts gave concrete form to formations of self, others and an imagined geography of paradise. It was also concerned with what one might describe as the trade-routes of photographic objects. In the course of the research for this exhibition over 40,000 photographic 'objects' relating to this small group of islands in Polynesia, were identified in European, North American and Australasian collections, and this number was far from exhaustive. What were the dynamics that moved these photographic objects from point A (Samoa) to Point B and then to Point C, the archive? What are the significances of such dynamics? What are their historical specifics and transformations? What were the politics and poetics as they move into different spaces in different forms?<sup>8</sup> These transformations embraced the photographer's studio, the tourist's album, the book of popular anthropology, the picture postcard, the anthropological archive, the ethnographic monograph all of which made different demands on the image in terms of meanings and the different physical formats related to this. If

we accept, as Greg Dening has argued (1988, p. 26) that history is texted through its preservation, these are significant questions concerning how we think we know the past or a culture visually, a question too often obscured by the realist performances of images. Thus in this exhibition object status was given very precisely to each photograph: rather than simple context, the exhibition privileged the contexts of their making, circulation and captioning – the layered production of meaning which are too often suppressed or naturalised through content specific approaches. What was significant about the exhibition was that it brought together a critical mass of images from all over the world. The discursive tropes familiar to us all in the analytical deconstructions of colonial photography were made substantive through the stylistic rhythms and familiarities of form and content which emerged as photograph followed photograph – a statement of normative forms of photography within certain formations of genre and expectancy.

Usually when one goes to a photographic exhibition, whether ethnographic, documentary or art, the image is presented in one authoritative form, premised variously on content, aesthetics or social action. In 'Picturing Paradise' photography was moved diametrically away from the rare or unique in terms of content or object. Many of the images appeared in the exhibition a number of times, printed differently, contextualised differently – each performance registering a differently nuanced meaning through shifts in form and function. If content was clearly relevant, the *forms* of its presentation were crucial. For example Thomas Andrew's photograph of a young *manaia* appeared as an albumen print and, coloured, as a book illustration. Andrew's photograph of about 1893 'A Samoan Belle' appeared in no less than five forms – an albumen print in two formats, one with retouching, as an illustrated in *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* in 1897 in an article entitled 'A Lotus Land of the Pacific' and translated into an oil painting by

Count Pieri Nerli, friend of Robert Louis Stevenson entitled 'Samoan Woman in Fete Dress'. Not only was the image itself transformed through reworking and recontextualising, but shifts in the *physical* manifestations were integral to the different possible readings of the image/object in all its performances. Likewise, another example is this portrait of a young Samoan woman that was shown in Oxford in both albumen print and platinum print (figure 1), both roughly contemporary, the late 1890's. The differences in tonal range and point texture invite very different responses from the viewer. Interestingly it is the very slightly harder edged albumen print (which was probably cheaper too) which appears in most ethnographic collections compared with the softer, perhaps less 'scientific', grey tones of the platinum print. One doesn't wish to over-read this, but the fact that Andrew was producing the image simultaneously in two very different printing papers suggests that they were aesthetically and informationally differentiated at the time of production.

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I have now reached a position in my own institution, a position in which I am supported, where I never do photographic exhibitions about ethnography of content, all our exhibitions are about ethnography of seeing. I never do exhibitions of, for instance, Papua New Guinea in 1920. I feel that these approaches are valid only in the communities themselves where images and photo-objects become absorbed into very different historical trajectories. To use the shift in thinking towards which I have been arguing, appropriately, dynamically and reflexively one must distinguish between different dynamics of internal and external ethnographies and the relationships inherent in such ethnographies. In external ethnographies the realistic nature of photography and the expectations of it, its ap-

parent simplicity and its ubiquity, such exhibitions might, for a distant audience, slip into voyeurism and neo-exoticism, confirming cultural assumptions about a people or place as exotic or primitive rather than promote a more complex understanding<sup>9</sup>. Further historical images used in this way – even when contextualised – are through slippage, part of the discourse of atemporality generated by traditional anthropological inscription and description, culture relentlessly located in the past. The viewer needs to be firmly and clearly placed in a reflexive position to the material so that the viewer's own use of such images is implicated, as was the case in 'Picturing Paradise'. Internal ethnographies, how a given society uses images and how images

have 'social presence' within a culture are best, to my mind, positioned within that society as a facet of auto-ethnography.

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To be able to think about photographs in this way requires a considerable shift in disciplinary and institutional thinking about photographs. It means accepting that there is no intellectually valid reason for treating photographs differently within an institution – say as objects and archive. It means giving photographs the same status in the collections as ob-

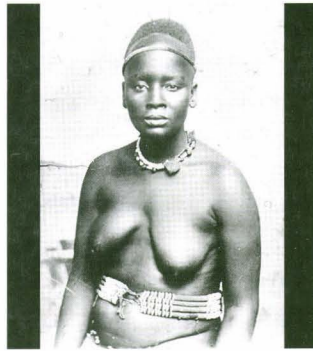
jects – this has implications for access, exhibition, loan and accession policy. It means accepting that photographs are not just 'of' things, but are things to think with. There are of course photographs which achieved 'object status' years ago, those which accord with established canons of art history. The vernacular and scientific photographs such as those with which social historians and anthropologists are engaged are seldom accorded such status. They are not perceived as 'important pictures', merely tools. By whose standards? How are judgments of value and rele-



Platinum print of a portrait of a young Samoan woman by Thomas Andrew c. 1893 (Courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford)

vance arrived at? In ethnographic collections we curate other peoples' histories and one has a responsibility to curate in the fullest terms in order to accommodate differently conceived notions of 'importance'.

The object approach to photographs also presents a problem of volume. If each performance of an image is equally valid and significant in historical terms, then it is impossible to take the picture-library route and say 'oh, we have that picture, we've seen that picture' (words which I have actually heard from the mouths of those ethnographers who see nothing but content). One has now to keep the negative, and the lantern slide, the print in various formats, one has to resist the seductions of digitalisation as the cure-all for photograph collections, because to be so seduced removes us from the formats in which the image was perceived, disseminated and 'meant' within given frameworks (Schwartz, 1996, pp. 57-58). In documentation, one has to work equally at the physical nature of the photographic-object as at the content. It means resisting showing photographs beautifully framed and matted, aestheticising on gallery walls, but show-



Albumen print, 1890's, showing damage from repeated handling. One gets a sense of the use of this image which was purchased in South Africa by a soldier during the Boer War. (Courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford)

ing the full object, with the corners broken off, with the dirt in place, for one gets a sense of an object used and meanings made within specific historical contexts (figure 2). This desirability of focussing intellectually on the image-object rather than the image content, becomes, to my mind, more important in the digital age, when the materiality and the relationship of that materiality to the image is one of the few guarantees of the integrity of the photograph in historical

terms. The digital collection may be a desirable first access to content, but to rely on it for visual information is to ignore half what the image has to tell us through its object forms.

*Histoire de mentalité* is a notoriously difficult field, yet as it relates to photography, through the use of the images, and in anthropology through the makings of cultural meaning, the materiality of the photography and how people have responded to it, talked about it and used it is a crucial element in the consideration of visual histories, cultural representation and qualitative involvement of visual images in the cultural process, which we over look at our peril.

## Notes

1. Brenda Danet (1997) has argued a similar approach for textual objects (letters, books, legal documents etc.).

2. For a summary of approaches to material culture which inform my arguments here see Miller, 1996.

3. The circumscribing technological possibilities in any instance of photographic encounter will, to an extent, translate into ethnographic possibilities.

4. For a discussion of an alternative photographic strategies in the ethnographic museum see Edwards, 1995.

5. Except in the case of those categorised as «art» or those presented in the context of photographic technology, for instance the popular photography gallery at National Museum of Photography in Bradford. I understand that, at the time of writing, this gallery is soon to be dismantled.

6. Significantly this photographs enjoyed an ambiguous status within the institution where, despite the unengaged and didactic approach, this photograph,

and several others by major «named» photographers in the gallery, were actually accorded object status within the museum, accessioned by the Art Department because they were nevertheless evaluated by different criteria outside the Life-Cycle Gallery (Lovelace, personal communication).

7. Probably the nearest approach to mine was the Southeast Museum of Photography, Daytona Beach, Florida, who approached it as a social and cultural history of photography. Although the overall theme was strongly present in Cologne and New York the former took a more didactically ethnographic approach, the latter a more aesthetically marked approach.

8. For instance the images originating from many sources and multiple intentions which are now valorised as historical ethnographic documents in museums and archives.

9. Such was the reaction of some to, for example, material shown in Britain recently, portraits by Mali photographer Seydou Kieta and Satish Sharma's collection of bazaar studio colour portraits from India.

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