

Material beings: objecthood and ethnographic photographs

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This paper argues that the material and presentational forms of photographs are central to their meaning as images. Drawing on work from the anthropology of material culture, it explores the significance of the materiality of ethnographic photographs as socially salient objects. The argument suggests that, while the analytical focus has been on the semiotic and iconographical in the representation of race and culture, material forms of images are integral to this discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Visual Studies have always, as is reasonable and as the name suggests, had the visual as both the defining object of study and the defining methodology. However, the purpose of this paper is to suggest that the visual does not stand alone, especially in relation to historical still photographs. Photographs are both images and physical objects which exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience. They have “volume, opacity, tactility and a physical presence in the world” (Batchen 1997:2) enmeshed with subjective, embodied and sensuous interactions with them. Writing on photography for many decades has resonated with the photograph as object, especially in relation to the “fine print” on one hand and conservation concerns on the other. Despite the clear realization of this physical presence, the way in which material and presentational forms of historical photographs project the image into the viewer’s space is overlooked in many analyses of historical images or critiques of “the archive”, whatever their nature. The transparency of the medium is such that “in order to see what the photograph is ‘of’ we must first suppress our consciousness of what the photograph ‘is’ in material terms” (Batchen 1997:2) – in such analyses photographs become detached from physical nature and consequently the functional context of a materiality that is merely glossed as a neutral support for images rather than being integral to the construction of meaning.

Patrick Maynard, one of the few critics to have engaged in an extended fashion with the “thingness” of photographs, as sets of marks on a surface, argues

the resulting limitations: “Perhaps what has ... most obdurately stood in the way of our understanding of photography is the assumption that photography is essentially a depictive device and that its other uses are marginal” (Maynard 1977:24).¹ Therefore, as a heuristic device, I shall argue that there is a need to break, conceptually, the dominance of image content and look at the physical attributes of the photograph which mould content in the arrangement and projection of visual information. My argument is not intended to attempt the impossible – to divorce the materiality of the photographic image from the image itself. Just as Barthes argues that the image and referent are laminated together, two leaves that cannot be separated – landscape and the window pane (Barthes 1982:6) – photographs have inextricably linked meanings as images and meanings as objects; an indissoluble, yet ambiguous, melding of image and form, both of which are direct products of intention. I shall shift the methodological focus away from content alone, arguing that it is not merely the image *qua* image that is the site of meaning, but that its material forms, enhanced by its presentational forms, are central to the function of photographs as socially salient objects and that these material forms exist in dialogue with the image itself to make meaning.²

Thus our understanding of photographic representations is not merely a question of visual recognition or semiotic but that visual experiences are mediated through the material nature and material performances in the formats and presentations of visual images.³ Photography is not merely the instrument of indexical inscription, it is a technology for visual display experienced as meaningful. Materiality translates the abstract and representational of “photography” into “photographs” which exist in time and space. As Porto has argued, we should think in terms of representational, imprinted objects rather than an imprinted representation. The possibility of thinking about ethnographic photographs rests on the elemental fact that they are things – “they are made, used, kept, and stored for specific reasons which do not necessarily co-incide ... they can be transported, relocated, dispersed or damaged, torn and cropped

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and because viewing implies one or several physical interactions” (2001:38). These material characteristics have a profound impact on the way images are “read”, as different material forms both signal and enforce different expectations and use patterns.

As I shall maintain throughout this paper, experience of the image component alone is not to be confounded with the experience of the meaningful object (Gaskell 2000:176), just as experience of the material cannot be confounded with or reduced to experience of the image. For instance, the experience of looking at an historical image on a computer screen is profoundly different in the understandings it might generate from the experience of, say, looking at the same image as an albumen print pasted in an album or a modern copy print in a file. I shall draw on work from both photography and the anthropology of material culture. Indeed in many ways there are similarities between both material culture studies and visual studies in that they do not necessarily respect disciplinary boundaries and secondly the “grammar” of both image and things is equally complex. While clearly my argument could take a number of theoretical turns, for instance, in a phenomenological direction, I want to keep the theoretical close to the ground and consider the materiality of specific forms of kinds of objects, ethnographic photographs, rather than develop a theorized vision which might simply reproduce an abstract photographic discourse. The close-up view allows us to grasp what might allude the broader view, while, at the same time, detailed empirical studies can advance theoretical understandings (Ginzburg 1993).

Finally, considering the ethnographic photograph as material culture might point to new understandings in an area of study in which the semiotic and the ideological instrumentality of such imagery has been an especially strong analytical focus. The colonial and anthropological archive has been a privileged site of critique in post-colonial and post-modern analysis.⁴ Yet “the archive” is not homogenous in either its styles or its forms. Further, the way in which images were absorbed into anthropology and described as “ethnographic” or “scientific” reveals the archive as a material object in its own right. While saturated with social, economic and political discourses, the archive as a material object projects images to the viewer in certain ways. Consequently, I want to explore the potential of material culture approaches to a body of material which in some ways has become analytically entrenched, dominated by the semiotics of image and reified notions of “archive”.

MATERIAL MATTERS

Materiality, as I am using it here, takes two broad and interrelated forms. First, it is the plasticity of the

image itself, the paper it is printed on, the toning, the resulting surface effects. Such technical and physical choices in making photographs are seldom random even if they are not fully articulated. For instance, as Schwartz has argued, “...the choice of ambrotype over paper print implies a desire for uniqueness, the use of platinum over silver gelatin intimates an awareness of status; the use of gold toning a desire for permanence” (1995:58). Second are the presentational forms – carte de visite, cabinet cards, albums, mounts and frames – with which photographs are inseparably enmeshed. Both these forms of materiality carry another: the physical traces of usage and time.

Materiality is closely related to social biography. This view argues that an object cannot be fully understood at any single point in its existence but rather should be understood as belonging in a continuing process of meaning, production, exchange and usage. As such, objects are enmeshed in, and active in, social relations, not merely passive entities in these processes.⁵ Resonating throughout this paper are two forms of social biography, relating to the forms of materiality I have just outlined. First is the social biography of image content, such as different prints, publication formats, lantern slides and so forth, all of which involve changes of material form. Second is the social biography of a specific photographic object which may or may not be physically modified as it moves through space and time.

Throughout the history of photography the visual properties of the surface of the image have depended on the material. They have exceeded the direct indexical visual use, and created, literally and metaphorically, another dimension to the image. The arrival of new photographic techniques, formats and material forms demanded different poses and different spatial arrangements, both within the frame and, importantly, in the act of viewing the material object. For the objecthood of photographs is confirmed by the act of viewing, the eye as a bodily organ functions within a larger somatic context. This implies specific relations with an embodied viewer and thus viewers’ responses to photographs.⁶ Material forms create very different embodied experiences of images and very different affective tones or theatres of consumption. For instance, framing devices distinguish relations between photographic space and the viewer’s space, some, like the photographic frame, accentuating the space; other forms, like a stereographic card in a viewer, elide them.

Thus choices matter. Choices are affective decisions which construct and respond to the significances and consequences of things and the human relations with which they are associated. In this context Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus” is useful for it allows individual discretionary action within a structured set of dynamic dispositions (Bourdieu 1977:81). It not

only suggests a framework for the fluidity of material choices but also helps avoid the over-determinism which has characterized many analyses of ethnographic photography and “the archive”. It is, Miller argues, often when objects are assumed trivial and not to matter that they are most powerful and effective as social forces. However, it is only in relation to materiality that we can address the actual contexts in which objects are made to mean. “Through dwelling upon the more mundane sensual and material qualities of the object, we are able to unpack the more subtle connotations with cultural lives and values that are objectified through these forms, in part because of the qualities they possess” (Miller 1998:9–12). Even the most pragmatically engendered materialities, such as photograph frames and albums, come to have meaning through the habitual reiterations of engagement with them (Pellegram 1998:109). While such choices, however, cannot be reduced to a single purposeful expression, they are redolent, latent and incidental meanings, forming bridges between mental and physical worlds, conscious and unconscious (Miller 1987:99).

In a brief overview one can only summarize the various influential theories of material culture, many of which have also resonated through writing on photography. Many Marxist-derived critiques of material culture, and of photographs, have been couched in terms of the modes of production, the alienating qualities of the mass-produced object or the ideological instrumentality of photographs, objects fetishized and embedded in the superstructural. At the same time the semiotic turn has subordinated the object qualities and privileged representational. Here the influence of theorists such as Saussure has positioned photographs in relation to quasi-linguistic forms, with debates over the sign, symbol and degrees of iconicity. While these debates are key to thinking about photographs, they tend to reduce photographs to passive vehicles of meaning at an abstract level. Yet the translation of abstract photography into photographs is a fundamentally material process manifested through specific objects which have physical and concrete presence outside an individual’s mental image and usage of it. This process has had a ghostly presence in some influential work. For instance, Tagg, writing of the photography of slum clearance in Leeds, points to the material forms – “The albums were in the room. They passed from hand to hand” – but he does not use the performative qualities of those photographs as active participants in the discourse (1988:145). Likewise Sekula, in discussing the formation of “the archive”, states: “the central artifact of this system is not the camera but the filing cabinet ... In structural terms, the archive is both an abstract paradigmatic entity and a concrete institution” (1989:353). The “archive” in Sekula’s

model is depended not only on the repetition of style and iconographical form but on the affective tone of systematic material presentation, premised on material proximity.

The “material turn” in anthropology in recent years has stressed increasingly the centrality and complexity of social meaning in relation to material objects. It is concentrated on their mundane social existence rather than on a fetishized object-other (Miller 1987:3–5, 10). Miller, drawing on Langer’s work on discursive and presentational forms, has argued for discussions of artifacts to be explicitly separated from linguistics models which he sees as too clumsy and restrictive. Rather material culture analysis, proceeding from an anthropological position of direct observation, allows us to question ingrained assumptions concerning the superiority of language over other forms of expression such as visual and material forms, and constitute the objects as important bridges between mental and physical worlds (Miller 1987:96–99). Recent developments in visual anthropology, as identified by Banks and Morphy, also point in this direction, arguing that there is a shared methodology and theoretical framework between visual recording, its analysis and material culture, both being concerned with material visual phenomena and social action (Banks and Morphy 1997:14). Objects, consequently, are not just stage settings for human actions and meanings but are integral to them. Indeed Gell has argued that objects themselves can be seen as social actors, in that they construct and influence the field of social action in ways which would not have occurred if they did not exist or, in the case of photographs, if they did not exist in this specific format. This allows for a theory of objects which allows us to think about how new forms of objects and new sets of social relations are linked (Gell 1998; Gosden and Knowles 2001:17–19).

The interrelated concerns of the material and those of social biography have been convincingly argued by Deborah Poole as a “visual economy”. This model moves analysis of photographs beyond “representations” to focus instead on the image’s “exchange values” and its performative possibilities at a given historical moment. It extends Tagg’s model of “currency of photography” in which “...items [were] produced by a certain elaborate mode of production and distributed, circulated and consumed within a given set of social relations: pieces of paper that change hands, found a use, a meaning and a value, in certain social rituals” (1988:164). As Poole argues, it is important to give equal weight to representational content and to the use value and material forms through which groups of images were exchanged, accumulated and thus given social value. Value is not restricted to image value but is integrally related to

the power of such images accumulated as objects (Poole 1997:11–12).

While the political functions which have defined the analytical concerns of broadly Foucaultian or post-structuralist work remain, Poole's model allows us to modify and refine this view by asking a very different set of questions. The significance of material form, the very physicality of photographs, is one of those questions. Such questions also allow us to consider differently the performative, phenomenological and experiential qualities of photographs and their social biography as socially salient objects moving through space and time. Materiality mediates other aspects of a visual economy which allows us to think not only of ethnographic photographs as defined by content but, also, the social and material mechanisms through which they become ethnographic.

The forms in which images are displayed and used follows their function in a discourse of culturally circumscribed appropriateness. This cultural expectancy engages photographs in the most profound discourses of form, aesthetics, science, social distinction and appropriateness of form (Miller 1987:8). For material culture and social biography require an ethnography of photographic practice itself. How are photographs actually used as objects in social space? How are they acquired and accumulated? By whom? How are they displayed? Where? To whom? Which remain in small private worlds intentionally hidden? How do these link with the performative material culture with which the photographs are linked such as frames and albums? If objects serve "to express dynamic processes within people, among people and between people and the total environment" then the production, accumulation and social relations of ethnographic photographs as objects is open to such analysis (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Holton 1981:43).

As in other classes of photographs, these processes of material dynamics in ethnographic photographs lead to increasing integration on one hand or an increasingly specific differentiation on the other. These in their turn are inflected through the social biography of photographic objects. One might characterize anthropology in the nineteenth century as a period of integration when, through a privileging of content, photographs from many sources in many material forms became "ethnographic" through the act of consumption within emerging yet specific disciplinary paradigms. On the other hand, increasing differentiation of images of scientific intention is found with the emergence of a proto-modern anthropology around 1900. The technical possibilities of the small quarter plate contact print with no dark room manipulation beyond what was need to achieve a tonally balanced print, which was produced by anthropologists such as Haddon or Spencer, provide

the material expression of the truth values of direct field observation. In other cases scientific photography required a print form adequate to the performance of precise visual information, namely a clean sharp paper as opposed to a textured paper – the desire for legibility being materially expressed. What is important is the way in which intellectual shifts are mirrored in material changes, in a way which cannot necessarily be reduced to a crude technical determinism. These examples suggest that cultural notions of photographic styles and object forms appropriate to the expected performance of photography in a given context operated within anthropology as much as in wider photographic practice.

SOME OBJECTS OF ETHNOGRAPHY

While the arguments outlined above are applicable to a wide range of historical photographs and their presentational forms, I am going to consider now this materiality specifically in relation to some ethnographic photographs. I am using this term to encompass both photographs made and circulated with ethnographic intention from the moment of inscription and those which, in the nineteenth century especially, became absorbed into anthropological spaces of consumption. The analytical focus on representation of race and culture has concentrated on the deconstruction of the image on iconographical, semiotic and instrumental axes, largely within the paradigms of the colonial gaze. However, following the position outlined above, considering the materiality of ethnographic photographs and the latent meanings in those forms might suggest more nuanced and differentiated readings of "the archive", in turn allowing for a more thorough excavation of their full social, cultural and historical significance.

In this particular excavation I shall start by discussing whole collections and then move towards specific photographic objects. First are two examples which demonstrate the way in which the filing cabinet and the plasticity of the photographic object come together as material forms central to making the image-bearing surface of photographs more visible as scientific anthropology.

Between 1935 and 1940, the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology undertook a project which materially transformed its photographs (Boast *et al.* 2001:3). The museum had collected photographs from its foundation in 1884. Like so many anthropological "archives" this was not so much a systematic development of the "thesaurus of culture" and undifferentiated appropriative desire as a serendipitous accumulation of images from travellers, scientists, explorers and missionaries for instance, transformed into a collection through the "visual economy" in which the photographs operated.

This intellectual coherence was articulated through several thousand photographs which were either copied or had prints made from original negatives. These prints were mounted on 20.5 cm × 25.5 cm grey cards and numbered, with area divisions, on the top left-hand corner in black ink. None was captioned, the captions are filed separately typed on 7.5 cm × 12.5 cm cards.

This new object had little relation to the original beyond content. The coherence and equivalence of the photographs was created through copying, printing and mounting them identically. While there is some variation to accommodate substantial size differences between original images, many are homogenized. The standardized surfaces of the photographs and the unifying tonal range of the black and white glossy silver prints suggest uniformity, comparability – a mechanically controlled rather than mediated inscription. This reinforces the taxonomic readings of the images, creating a cohesive anthropological object rather than a series of images with their own semiotic energies. At the same time the embodied relation between the viewer and the images shifted. Instead of sitting with small loose prints the researcher stood at the large, specially designed wooden cabinets and flicked through series of identical objects. The archive effect is achieved only through the creation of a new material object.

A similar material rhetoric of image presentation can be found in the Photothèque at Musée de l'Homme in Paris, cohering an accumulation into a systematized archive. On the founding of Musée de l'Homme in 1938, material collected since the 1850s through various bodies with anthropological interests, such as Muséum d'histoire naturelle and Le Laboratoire d'Anthropologie, was brought together and systematized. In this case, original historical photographs or those printed from original negatives especially for the project were used (Barthe 2000:73). While it lacks the surface unity of the Cambridge project, the presentational forms create a juxtaposition and seriality which constructs atemporal anthropological object, suppressing the historicity of each photograph. Each photographic print was mounted on a 22.5 cm × 29.5 cm grey board with space for basic content captioning and classification. As at Cambridge this mount was not to enhance the photograph, but to support it, creating an object which could be manipulated to create individual scientific narratives, yet maintain visual comparability. Further, the mounts were colour-coded, signifying continent or region. The colours chosen have a mnemonic quality, reflecting the racial classification of the period: there was a black tab for Africa, yellow for Asia, blue for the Pacific, red for South America, pink for North America, and oddly green for Europe. There were also some combination colour classifications,

for instance the Arctic was represented by pink and yellow (Barthe 2000:77–78). The regularity of the physical arrangement of image, text and object unify the collection. Like the Cambridge project, individual authorship of the images is suppressed through presentational form to create an anthropological narrative. It is significant that this control of material disorder and the systematization of photographs occurred at a moment when photography was moving from the public spaces of a centralized resource to the private spaces of individual fieldwork.⁷ Both these cases created an equivalence between images, forming a narrative through material translations, spatial renderings and shifts in somatic relations with the photographs. It is the material object which sets scientific parameters on a wide range of photographic material and which thus demands the preferred reading of the photographs.

This is equally clearly articulated in relation to albums where the material form dictates both the narrative and the embodied relationship with the photographs. As Poole has argued, photographs formed their “own sets of objects separate and distinct from the objects they portrayed” (1997:115). Material forms literally created the object of study through the grids of rows and columns to which the formats of photographs lent themselves. The grid echoed the arrangement of objects in scientific engravings and the seriality of the file, all mounted in the same way creating the cohesion of the visual collection. The large loose-leaf portfolios of the *Anthropologisch-Ethnologisches Album in Photographien*, produced by Hamburg photographer Carl Dammann in conjunction with the Berliner Gesellschaft for Anthropologie between 1873 and 1874, gathered carte de visite and cabinet format photographs into a racial taxonomy (Theye 1994/5). Similarly, the British Association for the Advancement of Science racial survey of the British Isles developed a comparative rhetoric through the juxtaposition of materially similar images (Poignant 1992:58–59). Their equivalence of format was integral to production of ethnographic “types” and the preferred racialized reading of the images. Indeed, arguably the rhetorics of equivalence were as much a result of the photographic formats of the mass-produced carte de visite and the spatial dynamics of that format (which produced certain forms of poses made with certain types of camera), as it was to the intellectual construction of representations of the racialized other (Poole 1997:11).

The creation of scientific material forms, such as the grid, are both constituting and constitutive of the intellectual spaces in which images were expected to perform. This can be used as a register against which to measure the making of the anthropological object. For instance, the personal fieldwork album of

Diamond Jenness who worked in Massim, New Guinea between 1911 and 1912, measures the distance between the personal and scientific rendering of anthropological experience. While the album presents a formal grid of nine images to a page, arranged in a narrative of functional sequences, from views and “types” to funerals, it is nevertheless inflected with the individual, both anthropologist and islander. The scientific series, on the other hand, is more distanced in its captioning and homogenizing in its registry order, reproducing “type” behaviours rather than individuated moments. In the album we sense the private response as opposed to the scientific response and the relationship between the two.⁸

However, looking at albums was also a social act. The nature of an album dictated, to a degree, the kind of images within it, the social relations of viewing and the appropriateness of format for the intended reading of the photographs in the album. For instance, large prints require large albums with heavy mounting card and substantial bindings, objects designed to perform images in the public space. To be “read” they have to be supported on a table or suchlike. Viewing them is a markedly different experience from the small albums for *carte de visite* or single small images which can easily be viewed held in the hand or laid on a knee. They are designed for more individual or restricted viewing. Hence one can argue that the difference in the material forms of the Dammann albums reflect not only differently focused objects but different experiences of viewing. The large portfolios of the German edition invited a distanced viewing, a display of comparative taxonomy, whereas the popular English version domesticated the scientific consumption of images in the size and format of their presentational form – a green embossed buckram album with gilt-edged papers.⁹

The material forms of photographs also refer to other object forms, with a dual function; first, to reinforce what is present in the photographs as images and second to refer beyond the object and the image in a mutually reinforcing sign system. Many colonial ethnographic albums and their decoration literally set the scene for the photographs. For instance, an album from Dutch East Indies, dating from c.1890–1900, has a wooden cover and a half-leather binding which is shaped and painted in imitation of local rice-barn decoration. This underlines the “ethnographicness” of the images within the album and coheres the complex intersecting ethnographic and exotic discourses around them.¹⁰ Other such albums use local crafts style and materials, from silverwork to ikat to perform the images they encapsulate, focusing their semiotic energy towards preferred readings of the images as an essential South-East Asia.

Likewise, commercially produced nineteenth-century albums from Japan, such as those sold to visi-

tors in their hundreds by Farsari of Yokohama, combine material and visual signifiers. The artifactual extension reinforces the Japanese, enhancing exotic experience (Odo 1997). In one such example, photographs are mounted one to a page in a large lacquered album inlaid with mother of pearl. This object in turn is kept in a padded printed cotton box, closed with traditional Japanese silk and bone toggles. Many of the albumen prints were hand-tinted, a surface intervention shifting the reality-effect of the photographs but one which, in its link to Japanese watercolour painting, also signifies Japan. Unpacking the box suggests not only the resonances of the exotic experience,¹¹ but reinforces the readings of the images through these inflections. Like the South-East Asian album, it was made specifically for the display of photographs. The extended wrapping of the surface of the image sets up the cognitive approaches to that image. Display functions not only to make the thing itself visible but to make it more visible in certain ways to function as statements of both locality and alterity (Maynard 1997:31–32).

If intellectual anthropological ideas and the material forms of photographs existed in a symbiotic relationship, the corollary is that it is possible to gain some understanding of the intellectual processes of anthropology through a consideration of the material forms of photographs. This is demonstrated through aspects of the photographs of the Torres Strait Expedition of 1898. As I have discussed elsewhere (Edwards 1998), *visuality* was key to the Expedition’s agendas. What concerns the argument here is the way in which materiality reveals the intensity of anthropological visual intention. Expedition accounts show that many more quarter plate than half plate negatives were purchased.¹² A sizable proportion of the latter were used to record sites of major ritual significance (which the Expedition anthropologists saw as the key to traditional Torres Strait society). These photographs duplicated the quarter plate images. The technological choice of a larger half plate with, in this case, slower emulsion and linked with a short focal length, allowed a finer inscription on the photographic plate, detailed in every nuance of texture and shading which the orthochromatic plates of the time would allow. The choice of the half plates, it can be argued, reflects the importance and intensity with which the Expedition viewed sites of ritual and mythical significance, reproducing intellectual desires materially through the choices of photographic technology; they are very literally things that “matter”.

Single images without the performative base of either the collection or the album can still be redolent with material significance. Material marking of the photographic object is always integral to the material evidence of the photograph, representing the marks of human interaction with the object, and the actions of

agencies on the surface of the image through use (Maynard 1997:25). Viewed as socially functioning objects, the scars on photographic objects are testimony to their historicity and social biography. The dog-eared album, the photograph with surface interventions, lost corners where images have been ripped from albums, photographs cut in pieces, scratches, missing emulsions, photographs marked up for publication, with cropping marks in blue pencil, annotations, stamps and labels on the back piling up: these material accretions present an archaeology of use and point to shifting perceptions of the images and their performance within an anthropological discourse. For instance, Cambridge anthropologist A. C. Haddon used photographs to trace off specific cultural objects represented in photographs (tracing the trace): he overpainted photographs with colour, cut them up, or pasted them together in different configurations. This was more than merely looking at photographs, but a making of anthropological meaning through surface interventions on the image (Edwards 2001:56–57). Similarly, although less dramatic, are the cropping marks on photographic prints. Through such interventions with the surface of the image one sees, for instance, Evans-Pritchard constructing his visualization of the Nuer for some of the most influential ethnographies ever produced.¹³ As these examples suggest in merging materiality and social biography, we see photographs as active objects in the making of anthropological meaning through the material interventions made to them – wilful marks pushing images towards a different significance through those interventions (Maynard 1997:31).

Material form gives access to the social biography of the photograph in a way that can reveal possible readings of individual images as well as indicating shifts in use from the “popular” to “scientific” image.¹⁴ Thomas’ argument in relation to other classes of objects can be equally applied to photographs as objects: “As socially and culturally salient entities, objects change in defiance of their material stability. The category to which a thing belongs, the emotion and judgement it prompts, and the narrative it recalls, are all historically refigured ... Something which effaces the intentions of the things’ producers” (Thomas 1991:121). In the Pitt Rivers Museum collection there are two apparently identical photographs entitled “Apache Bathers” showing a group of Native American Apache men and women waist deep in a pool.¹⁵ However, the square format albumen prints (8.3 cm × 8.3 cm) and the very slightly different camera lens angle reveal the photographs to have been originally one object – a stereographic pair. The photograph(s) had been taken with the specific intention that it was viewed in a certain way – through a hand-held stereoviewer. This places the isolated

viewer within the stereo’s enclosing completeness, unaware of the surface and edges of the print. However at some time, probably the late 1880s, the stereo pair were soaked off their mount and separated out to be viewed as single images within an anthropological discourse. One image was owned by E. B. Tylor, the distinguished nineteenth-century cultural anthropologist and the other by his close colleague, Oxford biologist, H. Moseley. The change in material form not only changes the affective tone of viewing from the encompassing stereo to the consciousness of the pictorial edges and image surface of the photographic print, it allowed different possibilities to emerge from the original object as the single images moved into different interpretative spaces. Entering the museum collection they continued to be seen as single images, each resonating differently with the photographs with which they were juxtaposed through mounting on card. The shifting material form of a single object, its division and then partial reunion, can therefore be read as an archaeology of shifting perception and social saliency of the photograph.

Inadvertent marks to the object can be equally compelling, for the study of physical traces on photographs suggest their relation to other senses. The tactile qualities of the image leave their trace in the marks of handling. For example, a photograph of a Zulu woman is known to have been owned by a soldier in the South African wars of the late nineteenth century.¹⁶ The print is severely worn, it has finger marks on the surface of the image and on the paper of the reverse, a much worn fold mark, tears down the edges and dog-eared corners. One has a very strong sense of the embodiment of the colonial gaze, of an image actually being handled – touched examined, put away, brought out. While such projections must, of course, remain conjecture, the physical traces on an image nonetheless testify to its active role in social experience.

However, the same image, produced in different ways, can have very different affective tone, demanding subtly different readings. An example is a portrait of a young Samoan woman which was produced simultaneously as both albumen print and platinum print by Apia-based photographer Thomas Andrew in the 1890s.¹⁷ The differences in tonal range and print texture of the two objects invite very different responses from the viewer. Platinum not only suggests a desire for permanence but the exploitation of its much-admired velvet tones permeating the surface of the paper signifying an element of preciousness, transforming the representation of the subject. It is the more commonplace and cheaper albumen print which appears in most ethnographic collections. Possibly the slightly harder-edged clarity of albumen was a more appropriate material for the scientific

function when compared with the softer grey tones and the texture of the image permeating the paper fibres in the platinum print. One does not 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.

Such images, despite their commercial origin, were collected by nineteenth-century anthropologists. However, they were seldom arranged in albums. Rather as collected, such photographs were loose prints or single images on mounts. This suggests the need for photographs to operate within multiple narratives – series created and refiguration according to the interpretative demands upon them. Such images could easily be realigned in different narratives, passed around the classroom, lent to friends and colleagues. In this context *carte de visite* become very different objects from, for instance, those in the Dammann Album discussed above, they dictate the embodied relations of viewing and create different forms of appropriative and miniaturizing action through their material forms. For instance, a series of hand-tinted cartes of Sami people collected by archaeologist Arthur Evans in 1873 were stored in small leather cases (rather like a cigarette packets). In this highly portable presentational form they become private images, to be brought out and handled, demanding a different set of relations with the viewer. Indeed, in general one might argue that the material forms of photographs also played a significant role in the scientific sociability and the establishment of an interpretative community in proto-modern anthropology, as the availability of cheap prints and, later, the ease of making small effectively disposable images, meant that there was a massive flow of images amongst anthropologists (Edwards 2001:27–50). Such photographs functioned not merely as images but objects that entered the realms of reciprocity and exchange as markers of social relations of the material world. In many ways the Cambridge and Paris projects were responses to this unstructured “archive” as it became reproduced at institution level through accumulation.

CONCLUSION

There are many ways in which the idea of photographs as material culture might be developed – phenomenologically, through enhanced readings of the subjecthood of the viewer, studies of consumption, history of collecting and so forth. The intention of this paper is to outline possible material culture approaches and their potential for re-engaging with “the archive”. Maynard has argued that other theories of photography and vision have failed to provide a framework for understanding this crucial and central

technology and imaging system. Contrasting the material surface and “marking technology” with more usual approaches, for instance communication, information, instrumentality, can open new questions and understandings (Maynard 1997:55). It allows looking at and using images, as socially salient objects, to be active and reciprocal rather than simply implications of authority, control and passive consumption. They may be these things too, and the examples I have used undoubtedly function in this way at an important level, but they cannot be reduced unproblematically to them. The material social lives of photographic objects, the restoration of materiality to the archive, forestall such a reduction.

With material culture a central analytical approach, we can start to see the precise formation of the colonial archive, the precise relation between technology, format and representation, and the way in which there was an interplay between anthropological ideas and the material forms of photographs. The acknowledgement of the material force of historical photographs in anthropology and beyond is an integral part of their historicity and of major importance for our understanding of them.

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NOTES

- [1] Many of the ideas of this important study, especially from Chapter 2, saturate this paper. Their full exploration in relation to ethnographic photographs will have to wait for another time.
- [2] These issues will be explored at length in Edwards and Hart (forthcoming).
- [3] Indeed one of the challenges of the digital world is the very lack of materiality in photographs. Light is transformed not into a photographic negative but a series of invisible electronic pulses. Further digitalization is seen as the cure-all panacea to photographic collections, especially those that fall outside the cultural categories of “fine art”, but the way in which it creates an entirely new visual object is seen as unproblematic.
- [4] See, for instance, Lalvani (1996), McQuire (1998), Green (1984, 1985), Richards (1993) and Ryan (1997).
- [5] See Appadurai (1986), Edwards (2001:13–16) and Gosden and Marshall (1999).
- [6] While concepts of embodied subjecthood, perhaps in a Lacanian model, are clearly part of this argument, they are beyond the scope of this paper.
- [7] A not dissimilar project systematizing photographs was also undertaken by Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford in 1930–1931.
- [8] I have considered this collection in detail elsewhere (Edwards 2001:83–105).
- [9] Pitt Rivers Museum, Album 60.

- [10] Tropen Museum, Amsterdam, Album 282.
- [11] This analysis could be extended through the consideration of wrapping and unwrapping in relation to Japanese culture (see Hendry 1993).
- [12] Invoices show sixty dozen quarter plates and eighteen dozen half plates (Cambridge University Library Haddon Papers Item 1022).
- [13] For example Pitt Rivers Museum EP.N.1.48.
- [14] Here I do not mean the way images are reproduced in publications, which are indeed different material renderings of the same image, but the physical changes in a photographic object.
- [15] Pitt Rivers Museum Photograph Collections B54.13b, B54.28c.
- [16] Pitt Rivers Museum Photograph Collections B1A.36.
- [17] Pitt Rivers Museum Photograph Collections B60.1, B36.20d.

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