

Evocative Encounters: An Exploration of Artistic Practice as a Visual Research Method

Thera Mjaaland

The main objective of this article is to discuss a rethinking of knowledge production that involves the incorporation of artistic practice as one aspect of its methodology. The point of departure is still photography as one such practice, and the fact that it is almost entirely banished from mainstream social anthropological methodology and analysis. To acquire a new position for photography within social science research practice, a repositioning of both the researcher and the role of the image itself is sought. It is suggested that a visual methodology based on still photography must move beyond the interpretational boundary of the realist representational paradigm and approach the expressive aspect of the photographic medium. The empirical foundation for this article is the author's experience as an art photographer as well as a photographing social anthropologist in the northern province of Ethiopia, Tigray (Tigre).

If, however, we are prepared to see it [knowledge] not as a thing but as a *relation*, in which otherness is located on a borderline of consciousness and in which it is important to seek out correspondences and continuities between perceptions as it contemplates the nature of reality and the phenomena of the world, rather than as being located in defined cultural configurations, then a visual exploration [...] can reveal parallels that—beyond the social mask they respectively wear—may bring together the concerns of the anthropologist and the artist. [Richardson 2006: 70, my emphasis]

INTRODUCTION

The discussion in this article will explore the possibilities for a rethinking of visual methodology in social anthropological research by way of artistic practice. The concepts used in this exploratory essay relating to sensuous experience through

Thera Mjaaland (b. 1955) is trained as an art photographer and, in the period 1979–93, she exhibited frequently in art galleries in Norway and abroad. She taught photography at Bergen National Academy of the Arts, Norway (1996–99), and was head of the department of specialized art for two years (1999–2000). In 2004, she received her Cand. Polit. degree (MA) in social anthropology and is now a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Bergen. Her interests range from photography as research method, cultural object within social relations, narrative strategy and discursive practice in shifting sociocultural settings, to gender and development issues relating to North–South questions in general and Ethiopia in particular. E-mail: Thera.Mjaaland@iuh.uib.no and theramjaaland@yahoo.com

the impact of visuals are based neither in stable categories nor merely in subjective interpretations. Rather, inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's thinking [1988(1949)], experience is placed in an embodied *situation* relating to wider sociocultural, historical, and politico-ideological contexts, through actual practice. The conceptual instability in dealing with the sensuous in knowledge production is further countered by a methodological emphasis on *dialog* or, as suggested by Arnd Schneider, a "dialogical principle" [Schneider 2006b: 51]. Following these lines of argument, the discussion will treat meaning—or, in other words, the "sense" we make of reality—as *relationally* situated, and consequently understanding *knowledge as emerging in an encounter*.

At the base of my discussion is a critique of the imperative of nonintervention informing the relation between a researcher and the researched subject, asking if this is the most fruitful place from which to conduct social anthropological research. This argument addresses the conceptual splitting of mind/reason from the body/senses (still) thought necessary to obtain an ideal (textual) object of scientific knowledge. These epistemological moves are, in my opinion, necessary to escape the prevailing dichotomized worldview following from a (Western) scientific paradigm. Furthermore, this move enables an acknowledgment of the sensuous as intrinsic to knowledge production and, as such, representing one approach to a (legitimate) way of knowing. Rather, as David Howes asserts, "sensuous experience is not opposed to reason, rather it is replete with logic and meaning, both personal and communal" [Howes 2003: 43]. Therefore, I am taking as my theoretical point of departure that the mind and the senses are complexly interconnected—or, in Caroline Jones' wording, "embodied experience through the senses [...] is how we think" [2006: 5]. In this *sense*, absence of the sensuous in scientific scholarship could be understood as under-communicating aspects of the foundation for human cognition.

Therefore, to be able to create space for an epistemology that includes the sensuous as one prerequisite in knowledge production, I will first argue for a repositioning of the researcher from a participatory *observing* position to a position as social *agent*. Second, central to the discussion is likewise a necessary repositioning of the *role* of the photographic image and its use and interpretation in social anthropological research. Being trained as a professional art photographer as well as social anthropologist, and situated within still photography, I will address specifically the realism that informs the prevailing understanding of photographic representation. An alternative approach to visual methodology in general and still photography in particular based in an artistic orientation toward the expressive will be suggested here. Further, understanding artistic practice as a methodological attitude toward processual exploration, this line of argument touches on the extent to which art is capable of negotiating conceptual gaps caused by a dichotomized epistemology. Finally the strategy proposed in this article is not suggesting a new hierarchical relationship between visual representations and text, where visuals are given primacy over the textual, but rather is seeking to create a *position* for text and images to enter a dialogical relationship. The outcome of such a positioning is therefore not visuals illustrating texts, or *vice versa*, but the dialogical space created for new research questions to emerge from this evocative encounter.

ARTIST IN THE FIELD, RESEARCHER AS SOCIAL AGENT

To be able to present some empirical substance to this argument, my experience as a traveling art photographer and later a photographing social anthropologist in the northernmost region of Ethiopia, in Tigray [or Tigre; Mjaaland 2004, 2006], will form the basis for this exploratory discussion. When I did my first social anthropological fieldwork in Tigray during 2002, I had already been photographing in that region for almost a decade. At a time when documentary photography had lost much of its position as a reliable truth-witness within photographic discourse, I began a quest to investigate the realist style of photography. At the base of this interest was the fact that most of the images that reached Western mass media about Ethiopia were those of a people victimized by war and famine and, consequently, the intriguing implication this had for a Western understanding of the Ethiopian people.

Paradoxically, then, I found myself rather annoyed at first to discover that people wanted to take control over that which I—with references to Max Gluckman's [1958] "social situations" as well as de Beauvoir's [1998(1949)] embodied *situation* as a contextual moment for agency—have termed the "photographic situation." In the photographic situation in Tigray, people thus constituted themselves precisely as able agents rather than helpless victims. The reason it took a while to appreciate this, for me, unexpected subversion of a bias, I now understand as based in the challenge it posed to my own identity as an autonomous artist. People's eagerness to be photographed, and likewise the fact that photographs seemed to play a part in Ethiopians' lives (even if the amount of photographic images in circulation is less when compared, for example, to a Norwegian context), made me gradually surrender to these circumstances. Thus, well before I had started to study social anthropology, photography had drawn me into Tigrayan social life as "the photographer," and so as a social agent with a specific role in the community. Giving photographs back made dialogue possible and expanded my network through new invitations to photograph. However, photography as a process in practice was not fulfilling the imperative of nonintervention informing both documentary photography and the anthropological method of participatory observation. Instead, this process turned out to be informed by a principle of attentive intervention and dialogue. With hindsight, it is also possible to see that, as another unexpected consequence of this process, both my artistic work and my identity as an artist were gradually subject to change; I had begun to appreciate artistic practice as collaboration.

These photographic experiences constitute an extensive body of work with the archive label *Encounters* [1993–2006; Figure 1]. The series *Ethiopian Portraits*—basically from 2001 [Figure 2] and based precisely in these photographic encounters—is an art project published on the worldwide web.¹ These works likewise form the visual basis for my anthropology thesis, *Ane suqh ile. I keep quiet*, from Tigray [Mjaaland 2004]. Because of the extensive amount of work over some years, it was possible to identify tendencies in the material that were useful for the social anthropological inquiry. New questions emerged from the process of photographing as well as from the visual material, and a dialogic relationship



Figure 1 From the series Encounters: Alogen, Tigray 1997. (Photo: Thera Mjaaland).



Figure 2 From the series Ethiopian Portraits: Kebrä. Mayslek, Tigray 2002. (Photo: Thera Mjaaland).

evolved between text-based data and visuals in the research process itself, as the example below illustrates.

The photographs included in this research project take people's self-presentations and their attempts to produce an ideal self-representation seriously, and are thus understood as a discursive social process in a mediated photographic encounter. Together with the anthropological data obtained through informal dialogue and lengthy and semi-structured interviews, I learned how some aspects of personhood in the Tigrayan context were understood. A general preference for the "whole body" and a neutral expression, which is the local prerequisite for an ideal photographic self-representation informing local conventions, was juxtaposed with discourses concerned with aspects of personal integrity and bodily autonomy. These local discourses on the person are concerned with the need in the Tigrayan context to contain oneself emotionally, but also by controlling one's own visibility to avoid everything from social sanctions and witchcraft to political prosecution. That my attempts to represent them were deemed a failure, since I often did not include whole bodies (because I was concerned about coming close enough to be able to establish identification and empathy in a potential Western viewer), gave way to discussions that made me understand the subjects' point of view. Thus what at first looked like an age-old (Western) studio convention could be seen to have a specific social meaning in the Tigrayan sociopolitical context.

Following Sarah Pink [1999], the problem is how to use data obtained from a situation that is triggered by the very relationship between the photographed and photographer. In spite of the blurring of boundaries between the researcher and the researched that this position entails, the important point for the discussion here is to acknowledge precisely the knowledge an active, intervening collaboration in practice enables. Since silence is an important aspect of Tigrayan social practice (a point I will return to below), it is my conviction that a more observing attitude (at a distance) would not have taught me as much about how the world is understood from their point of view. Instead of seeing the blurring of conventional boundaries as a problem, the question is rather what could be learned from a more attentive intervention where the researcher is accepting her or his visibility and allowing for more direct reactions and comments from those subject to research? Consequently, intervention is not merely understood to blur a (Western) epistemological divide, but more importantly, I will argue, it makes possible an alternative position for the anthropologist where knowledge production is positioned *in* this encounter. Following David MacDougall, anthropological film enables an understanding that develops gradually in the evolving relationship between filmmaker (anthropologist), subject, and audience. Thus, the point MacDougall proposes is not about providing "a 'pictorial representation' of anthropological knowledge, but a form of knowledge that emerges through the very grain of filmmaking" [MacDougall 1998: 76]. Insights from filmmaking cannot always be directly transferred to stills, but MacDougall's assertion is, in my experience, applicable to creating a new position for the researcher when the aim is to develop a visual methodology that reaches beyond the confines of a realist representational paradigm. Rather, it allows a methodological use of photography understood as a *relational* visual process, which enables an

understanding of certain aspects of social practice that otherwise would go unnoticed [Mjaaland 2006].

VISUAL REPRESENTATION AND SOCIAL VISIBILITY

As noted by Howard Morphy and Marcus Banks, part of the postmodern epistemological critique was that anthropological methodology was based on a “double illusion of the neutral observer and the observable social phenomenon” [Morphy and Banks 1997: 13]. This point also concisely sums up my first social anthropological fieldwork experience, that observation as such was not a very fruitful method in the Tigrayan context. To clarify this point, Debhora Battaglia’s [1997] Trobriand experience is instructive. Battaglia terms the aspect of *absence* in Trobriand practice “invisible foregrounding,” which creates a space for negotiation when the threat from various uncontrollable agents’ destructive actions is overhanging. In the Tigrayan sociocultural and political situation briefly noted above, observations could likewise not be dealt with from the assumption that what is *made* visible is what is going on.

One example relates to Tigrayan women’s participation as combat fighters in the armed struggle to overthrow the Derg military regime in Ethiopia (1975–91). At some point women comprised 30 percent of the army within the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) [Hammond 1999]. The struggle’s ideological doctrine, which promised freedom from political and economic oppression and social changes for the population as a whole, also explicitly addressed women’s disadvantaged position in society [Young 1997]. However, afterward, ex-fighter women themselves have tended to under-communicate and downplay their participation and contribution to the revolutionary struggle. This aspect of women’s experience is not only silenced but also *made* invisible, contrary to the situation of men who participated, who are *seen* investing symbolic capital and reaffirming their manhood by still carrying semi-automatic weapons around [Figure 1]. However, women’s life stories revealed a great deal of mobility in women’s lives, both within and beyond the gender norm, showing that a return to a conventional life is not inevitably the case. Rather, their seeming compliance could be understood as a strategy to be able to negotiate space for agency beyond the norm within the confines of a sanctioned gender identity [Mjaaland 2004].

Then—a pertinent question at this point—why do I insist on a visual methodology under these circumstances? Stephen Tyler [in MacDougall 1998] advocates “evocation,” which produces an *understanding* rather than an anthropological object, and thus breaks the whole ideology of representational signification in anthropological discourse. It is also interesting in this respect that MacDougall [1998] suggests a (timely) shift from the focus on *appearance*, or surface description (in an image), to *imagination*. As Elizabeth Edwards asserts, “photography can communicate about culture, people’s lives, experiences and beliefs, not at the level of surface description but as a visual metaphor which bridges that space between the visible and invisible, which communicates not through the realist paradigm, but through a lyrical expressiveness” [Edwards 1997: 58]. Therefore, instead of producing visual data to be dealt with in a strictly realist

representational sense, and which is at a loss to incorporate the invisible aspects of social life, the focus is shifted to visuals depending on an imaginary leap to be able to *appropriate* human experience. In fact, appropriation as a scientific practice using artistic processes in the hermeneutic understanding Arnd Schneider [2006a] proposes, based on the “experience of learning” as well as “transformation,” could well inform the visual inquiry proposed here. The way forward, as suggested by Schneider, “is to conceptualise appropriation as one of the principle practices underlying any cultural contact or exchange, and therefore of any dialogical situation of ‘understanding’ each ‘other’” [Schneider 2006a: 28]. However, and likewise important, appropriation as method proposes an understanding of knowledge in social anthropological research, not as based in a necessary *a priori* fact, or authentic origin, but rather as potentially emerging in social encounters in the course of life itself.

(PER)FORMATIVE ASPECTS OF PHOTOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION

In the case of the series *Ethiopian Portraits* that I made, these photographs could be understood to enable a re-creation, or appropriating an encounter, and in James Clifford’s [in Coles 2000] wording, by creating a “contact zone,” suggesting precisely an experiential relation. Further, along this relational line of argument, my suggestion for understanding the photographic image beyond the representational framework finds support in Alfred Gell’s [1998] theoretical proposition about art objects as the equivalent of persons, or rather as social agents capable of agency in relation to other persons. Consequently, meaning is not then sought in semiotics, but precisely in social relations and “the practical mediatory role of art objects [photographs] in the social process” [Gell 1998: 6], thus suggesting an analytical focus well in tune with social anthropological concerns in general.

The challenge for an epistemology premised on this principle is, as Miwon Kwon notes, “a lack of recognition of the *relational* dynamic between experience and interpretation” [Kwon 2000: 87, emphasis in the original]. Theoretical support for this epistemological point of view, however, can be found in a constructivist perspective which, Stuart Hall asserts, allows for an understanding of *meaning* as precisely “relational” [Hall 1997: 27]. It is also important to bear in mind that photographs, in a relational sense, must likewise be understood to receive meaning from other existing (photographic and other) images—both private and public—as well as subjective and collective memories that “resonate,” in MacDougall’s wording [MacDougall 1998: 70]. Consequently, visual stereotypes of famine-stricken Ethiopians that have “burnt themselves” into many Westerners’ minds resonate with and relate to more recent photographs, and hence influence interpretations of other photographs from the same area. This could indeed be the case also for the series *Ethiopian Portraits*, as photographs from recurring catastrophes have informed a Western stereotypical image of Ethiopians. Consequently, photographic meaning is not only about how the person-like image-object, according to Gell’s theory, assumes a social role as an agent. It is also about how photographs, because of the realist style, enable the production of specific views of the world and the persons in it.

Analytically, this point of view establishes a need to identify discursive and formative aspects of the photograph to understand its specific role in a particular social context [Tagg 1988; Hoel 2005; Mjaaland 2004, 2006]. However, in the following I will, inspired by Judith Butler's understanding of gender performativity [1999(1990)], reintroduce with a slight twist the term "(per)formative" about this aspect of photographic representation, because this concept implies the involvement of negotiating subjects in discursive/formative identity processes. By actively taking part in the production of a desirable self-image, the person in Tigray is reaffirming her- or himself not primarily based in a photographic representation of how she or he looks but rather as the person wants to be *seen*. The Fijian Indians discussed by Edwards [2006] use photographic images to articulate history, memory and identity. In the Tigrayan context, the photographs could also be understood to promise a person's (visual) *eternity* in an extremely harsh, unpredictable, and often threatening life situation.

In *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*, Christopher Pinney [1997] focused similarly on this productive role of photography, and emphasized that this has enabled a counteracting of stereotypical classifications made in the Indian case by a colonial power. Much postmodern and postcolonial writing on photography discusses precisely discursive implications of photographs in relation to power [Tagg 1988; Mulvey 1989; Edwards 1992; Lutz and Collins 1993; Morphy and Banks 1997; Hight and Samson 2002, to mention a few]. However, the important point for my discussion here is that, instead of an analytical focus on the shortcomings of photographic representation, one way forward suggested by discourse analysis is to understand the particular meanings that photographs produce and reaffirm in specific sociopolitical and historical contexts. One example of the (per)formative aspects of photography is the image of Teberrih conducting the coffee ceremony in a village in Tigray, Ethiopia [Figure 3 and front cover of this issue]. Women claim the coffee ceremony to be *their* culture, and as such the image of a woman conducting the ceremony reaffirms an ideal image of Ethiopian womanhood. Interestingly, the image of women making coffee reaffirms more than an idealized womanhood for the women themselves. As a symbol of the generous hospitality of the Ethiopian culture, this image also feeds into a national identity that, transformed into a cultural commodity, can be used in transnational contexts.

The playfulness of this kind of photographic (per)formativity can further be traced in the Tigrayan photographer Aster Dagne's self-portraits [Figure 4] appropriating three different (but not necessarily culturally sanctioned) female styles—as a traditional woman, a modern woman, and a fighter woman—and likewise her dressing up of this anthropologist with (the same) traditional props [Figure 5]. The statement from one of the Indian photographers in Judith and David MacDougall's film *Photo Wallahs* [1991] comes to mind. Implicitly addressing the (per)formative role of photographs, he states, "photography is a way of awakening inner feelings [of identify]." That commercial photographer continues by saying:

It's a good medium. You can test anyone with it. I remember an instance.... A Chief Minister came here. Even though he was a Chief Minister we dressed him as the bandit

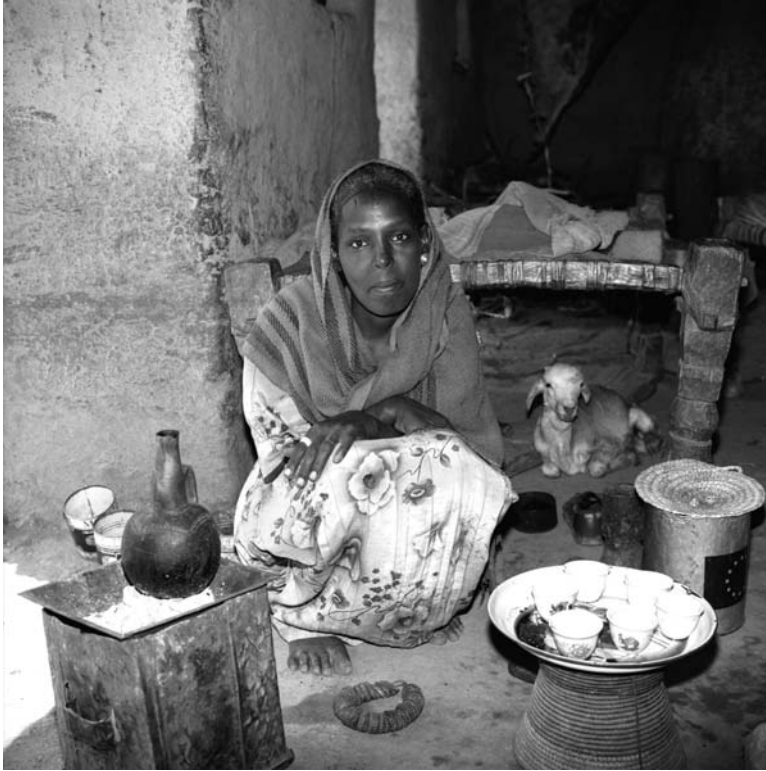


Figure 3 Teberrih conducting the coffee ceremony in her home in a rural village in Tigray, July 2001. (Photo: Thera Mjaaland).

Gabbar Singh. He became very happy. We could all see that he was a Chief Minister but he was also a thief! In his heart a thief was sitting. [MacDougall and MacDougall 1991]

Deconstructing aspects of power implicit in knowledge production in general and photography in particular has been a decisive postmodern (including feminist) critique as well as a postcolonial accomplishment, as has reflexivity, explicating the researcher's position (which, in any case, is implicitly visible in a photograph) and clarifying other underlying presumptions in general. However, important as these strategies are, they are not enough to bring the photographic *image* out of a blind alley in social anthropological research. In my opinion, the main problem is precisely the narrow realist understanding of photographic representation proving to be problematic, indeed, when the very construction of realism in photography has been questioned. Instead, I suggest that a way forward—without losing sight of the discursive/formative, or (per)formative, role of photographs in our analyses—is to investigate the medium's expressive potential through its connection to a realist paradigm. However, before I return to the task of expanding the scope for still photography within social anthropological research, I will make a brief historical detour, to emphasize the urgency in my quest.



(A)



(B)



(C)

Figure 4 (A, B, C) Self-portraits by the Tigrayan photographer Aster Dagneu, 2000–01. (Courtesy of the photographer).



Figure 5 Aster Dagnew's (2002) photograph of this anthropologist dressed in the same attire with references to traditional costumes. (Courtesy of the photographer).

PHOTOGRAPHIC METHOD IN A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Because of their involvement in the evolutionary scientific project concerned with race and closely related to Western colonialism, both filming and still photography were left out of the structural-functionalist revolution in social anthropology, in Howard Morphy and Marcus Banks' wording, because they had been "tarred by the evolutionists' brush" [Morphy and Banks 1997: 9]. Another reason was that, from a realist position, social structures were not "photographable," to use Pierre Bourdieu's [1990] conception. To date visual methodology holds a marginal position within mainstream social anthropology, even though a narrow niche for film does exist, as if moving film is less problematic, an assumption Anna Grimshaw effectively counters in her book *The Ethnographer's Eye* [2001]. Aside from the common use of photographs as visual *aides-mémoires* for the anthropologist, photography continues to inhabit an inferior position within anthropological texts, not least, as also mentioned by Morphy and Banks [1997], because of the

insignificant role these (most often amateurish) visual “illustrations” play in an anthropological analysis.

However, it is worth mentioning a few attempts to advance photography in social anthropological research. In their study *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis* 1936–39, Margaret Mead together with Gregory Bateson [1942] produced an impressive amount of photographic data, comprised of 25,000 stills and 22,000 feet of 16-mm film. Mead had been convinced that the use of photography could lead to “a quantum leap in methodology” [in Geertz 2000: 79], understanding photography as a powerful tool for both discovery and for testing hypotheses. However, their work never caused the methodological revolution hoped for. The first editions of Mead’s famous study *Coming of Age in Samoa* from a decade earlier, discussed by Joyce D. Hammond [2003], likewise included photographs.² Hammond emphasized the performative role the captions played in formulating an anthropological subject. Captions have also been the subject for discussions concerning E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s photographs of the Nuer.

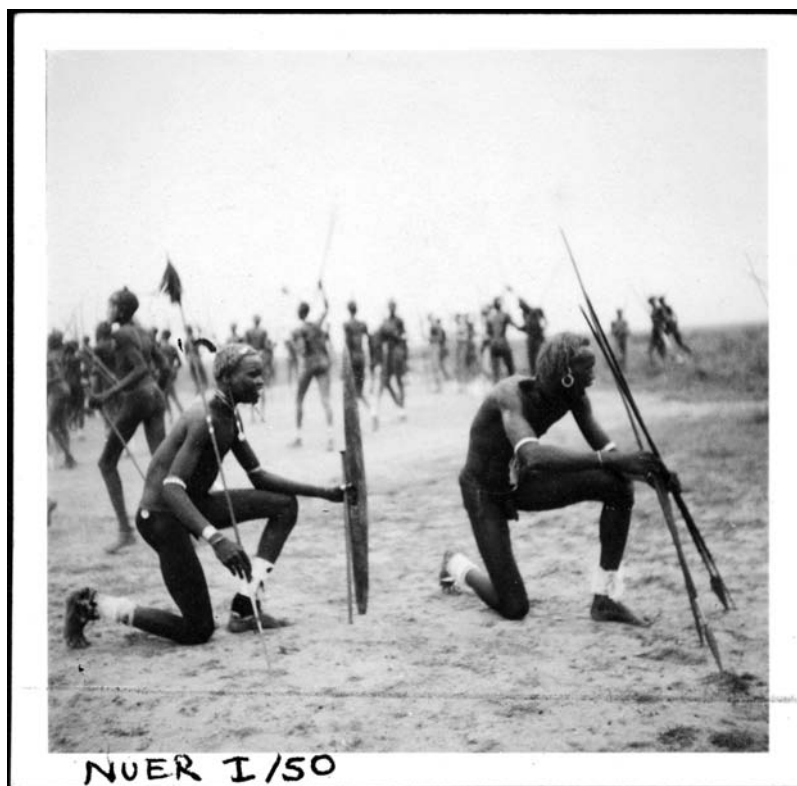


Figure 6 “Movement in wedding dance” published as Plate 6 (page 112) in E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s *Nuer Religion* [1956]. Photograph by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, 1936. The image reproduced here is from a scan of Evans-Pritchard’s working print, showing the publisher’s crop line below the two dancers. Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford (PRM 1998.355.25.2).

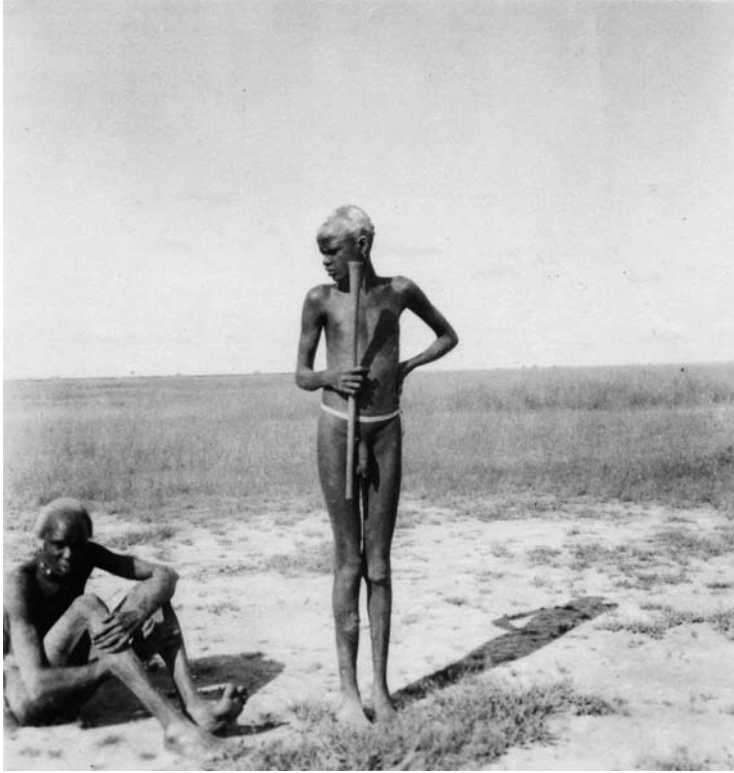


Figure 7 “Sandy ridge with cattle byres on the horizon (*Dok*)” published (cropped) as Plate VIII (facing page 68) in E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s *The Nuer* [1940]. Photograph by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, probably 1936. The image reproduced here is from a scan of Evans-Pritchard’s working print, showing the standing figure in the centre of the frame [see Morton 2005: 392]. Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford (PRM 1998.346.341.2).

Concerning his photograph captioned *Movement in wedding dance* [Figure 6 here], Brenda Farnell [in Morphy and Banks 1997: 18] asks rhetorically where the movement is in the image. However, looking at Evans-Pritchard’s photograph titled *Sandy ridge with cattle byres on the horizon (*Dok*)* [Figure 7 here]³, it is as well appropriate, with Barbara Wolbert’s [2000] discussion in mind, to repeat the question (since the cattle byres are hardly distinguishable in the distance): Where are the persons—who make up the foreground in the photograph—in the written caption? It might seem that Evans-Pritchard has, with a little help from precisely the written captions, fitted his (I feel) expressive photographs into a realist representational paradigm, thereby avoiding a more sensuously *imagined* encounter with the other as person. The visual in these projects is therefore stranded, in my opinion, because of the epistemological connection to the remnants of a positivist paradigm presuming a connection between knowledge and vision and consequently asserting a restricted (realist) understanding of photographic representation. Thus the captions in these examples serve to avoid

what Wolbert calls “the subversive potential of photography” [*ibid.*: 338] by severing or even blocking more sensuously evoked interpretations.

As Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright so timely assert, “[r]ecourse to a simple realist paradigm of one kind or another is no longer a guarantee of veracity or integrity, but the implications of this have yet to be embraced” [Schneider and Wright 2006: 8]. In this discursive environment, it is important not to forget contributions from practitioners (in the past and the present) who did and do investigate other possibilities visually. As Grimshaw argues, Jean Rouch’s anthropological cinema engages us precisely “through the disordering of the senses and the subversion of habitual ways of thinking as a precondition for plumbing new depths of knowledge and understanding” [Grimshaw 2001: 100]. Thus, a more relevant path for visual methodology would be to explore how photographs and other visual media can contribute to an expansion of the scope for anthropological knowledge by approaching the inquiry in question *differently* than text does.

REPRESENTING DATA VISUALLY, OR VISUALIZING EXPERIENCE

Interestingly, Elizabeth Edwards [1997] asserts that innovative art photography rather than realist ethnographic images would be in tune with the theoretical intentions of modern social anthropology. Her discussion is about the photographic medium’s potential to “question, arouse curiosity, tell in different voices or see through different eyes from beyond The [disciplinary] Boundary” [Edwards 1997: 54]. To be able to bring the discussion on still photography as a visual methodology forward, I therefore think it is important at this point to emphasize the divergent epistemological positions implicit in understanding the photographic image realistically as (pure) data, and the image understood expressively as evoking experience. My claim that the latter position needs to be investigated is based on the historical fact that a visual methodology caught up in a realist representational paradigm failed to be productive in a social anthropological research context. It is here, I think, that Edwards’ discussion of art photography to potentially rethink visual methodology is a refreshing one, not least because it feeds into and resonates with some of my own experiences as an artist in the field and a photographing anthropologist, in its merging of realist and expressive aspects of the photographic image.

Photography’s fluid position, according to Edwards, having lent its frame to science as well as art, realism as well as expressionism, allows for an “experimental inclusion of a specifically photographic expression” [Edwards 1997: 54]. Furthermore, she asserts that “the way to restore photography to a concrete contribution within the discipline [of social anthropology] is to harness those qualities peculiar to the *medium* of still photography” [*ibid.*, emphasis in original], referring to those visual qualities that are most often understood as opposed—document *vs.* art, realism *vs.* expressionism—as dialogically interdependent phenomena. In photography, this notion of opposition is based within the frame of a single image, as the photographic image, following Mary Warner Marien, simultaneously confirms and denies the truth “while emphasizing

the appearance of accuracy" [Marien 2002: 234]. The point, therefore, is not to reinvent photography as such to suit scientific enquiry more adequately, but to acknowledge the inherent ambiguities of the realist paradigm informing photography *as its most potent asset* not only within art but as well within social anthropological research. This point of view establishes a possibility for us to see this ambiguity as expanding the potential for the communicative aspects of the medium, involving the sense too. Precisely this unruliness and implicit tension form the basis for my own photographic artwork.

As an art photographer, my main concern is not realist representation as such, but to use notions of photographic realism to bring about a leap in the viewer's imagination about a specific theme. For instance, my intention with the series *Ethiopian Portraits* is not to present ethnographic data based on the appearance of Tigrayans but instead to *disrupt* visually the stereotypical Western perception of a catastrophe-ridden and victimized people, and hence to evoke an understanding of them as the able social agents that they indeed are. This has been done by resorting to an undramatic style based on a cross-culturally known portrait convention and, except for the Tigrayan landscape forming the "studio backdrop," the cultural context has been excluded to give priority to the person. Choosing the portrait convention's half-figure instead of the full-figure pose from a distance, and meeting the person's eyes straight on, are visual strategies attempting to mediate an encounter instead of positioning the viewer as a *voyeur*.

Emphasizing the ambiguity of postmodern photographic aesthetics, Edwards further asserts that the questioning attitude toward the image, as noted above, "makes the viewer acutely conscious of lived experience and the ambiguous nature of its representation precisely through the agency of lyrical photographic expression, embodying narrative depth, through association and the multiplicity of closures" [Edwards 1997: 69]. For example, the fragmentation and approximation that photographic representation involves, and which have caused a decisive criticism of its reliability, can therefore be understood to serve the purpose more satisfactorily than a representational overview of "everything." This viewpoint then is surely in conflict with a more conventional social anthropological perception of what it takes to acquire anthropological accuracy through visual representation as, for example, is asserted by Karl Heider [1976]. However, Heider's prescription requiring inclusion of whole bodies and the entire scene (from a distance) most often ends up as not very telling images, ones which as a consequence do not manage to engage the viewer. Following Morphy and Banks, Bateson and Mead's Balinese project [1942] failed precisely because they did not make the move "from using photography as a means of recording a world that was the product of a particular way of being and which involved a distinctive way of seeing, feeling and relating to the world, to an analysis that convincingly demonstrated how that world was seen, felt and understood by the Balinese" [Morphy and Banks 1997: 13]. It is not obvious, however, how this epistemological move could be conducted without including the sensuous in scientific scholarship.

Following Edwards, Elizabeth Williams' photographic series from Northern Sinai in 1993, *Strange Territory: Deserted Bedu Camp* [in Edwards 1997: 65–66], suggests one alternative in "the creation and examination of the interesting

space between the aesthetic expressive and ethnographic documentary in photography" [Edwards 1997: 64]. What in my opinion is decisively present in Williams' images is precisely what is absent. The focus on minute details like the shoes and the cloth left behind, or simply forgotten, when the Beduin camp broke up, is for me more evocative of a way of life in a particular environment than an overview (from a distance) of the scene when the people are moving on. Williams' fragmented photographs also bring to mind Gilles Peress' photographs of the Rwandan genocide in 1994. His book *The Silence* [1995] starts with a series of photographs of objects left on the ground afterward: a tarred photo album from a life most probably ended, and machetes. The silence evoked by these images emphasized by their undramatic and static style is potentially shocking by way of what is *not* present, and consequently creates a rupture in the flood of images of dead and mutilated bodies pouring in through Western mass media during and after those killings. This is not to say that these images are not dependent on context. In the Rwandan case it could hardly escape us and gives meaning to the absence in Peress' photographs. In a social anthropological case unknown to the public, context could in a similar way be provided by the text itself, creating a space for the photographs to visualize what the text does not manage to tell. Thus by placing the photographic image in a dialogical relationship within its (con)text, it is possible to establish a new *position* for the photograph in social anthropological research, one that embraces its most potent asset—the incorporation of the expressive in a realist mode of visual representation.

CONCLUSION

In spite of contemporary criticism shattering a dichotomized scientific premise, the Western "belief" in a (Cartesian) divide separating mind/reason from body/senses has not as yet been overthrown, leaving us with an unresolved epistemological issue that continues to prevent us from fully using visual and sensuous data in an academic context. As David Howes reminds us, "[t]he fact that texts and writing have traditionally been associated with reason in Western culture, while the body is associated with emotions, for example, does not mean that the text is intrinsically rational in nature or the body intrinsically irrational" [Howes 2003: 42]. However, in my opinion, visual methodology will remain marginalized in hegemonic knowledge production if disciplines like social anthropology and its subdiscipline visual anthropology are not willing to expose more explicitly the sensuous aspects implicit in a participatory methodological focus on human experience. The question is, further, if the enduring problem for modern social anthropology of professional legitimation, one discussed by Grimshaw [2001], can answer for reluctance with in the discipline to challenge its epistemological *doxa*? David MacDougall asserts precisely that this "*doxa* is more likely to want visual anthropology to confirm what [mainstream anthropology] already does than to do something quite different" [MacDougall 1998: 76]. The discussion in this article has explored the possibility for a visual methodology to do precisely something different.

It is here that aspects of artistic practice are suggested to enable a rethinking of the visual in social anthropological research. Artistic practice as understood here involves an intervening and learning social agent as well as utilizing ambiguities and visual tension within the image itself. This further enables a move from understanding the photograph realistically as visually represented data to understanding the image as an expressive medium for evoking experience. Hence my suggestion for still photography in social anthropological research, methodologically as well as analytically, is to reposition both the photographer and the photographic image in an encounter where meanings are mediated between social agents. The common features of these epistemological shifts are that they challenge (and even blur) prevailing (Western) conceptual boundaries, and hence make possible the positioning of what has been perceived as opposites (and most often hierarchically understood) in a dialogical relationship. Thus, by challenging the realist representational paradigm, likewise a shift from knowledge production understood as based in a divide between the researcher and the researched, to understanding knowledge as emerging in and from the encounter itself, is being asserted. The understanding suggested by Howes that “[s]ensory models not only affect how people perceive the world, they affect how they relate to each other: sensory relations are social relations” [Howes 2003: 55] likewise supports a path for the visual in social anthropological research contained within the discipline’s main analytical focus on social relations.

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NOTES

1. See www.thera.no and http://www.thera.no/?document_id=142.
2. Mead’s photographs, however, were not reprinted in several subsequent editions from 1932 onward. The reason for this is not clear, but the disproportionate number of photographs of the young woman Fa’amotu, Hammond [2003] suggests, could be one reason, especially when it was discovered that she was of different social status and came from outside the community that Mead studied.
3. Christopher Morton’s [2005] discussion of this particular photograph points to the different interpretive readings suggested by consulting the original print or negative as a historical object in an archival context or the differently framed published versions of the image within a text.

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