ANTHROPOLOGY AND ART PRACTICE

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TRAVERSING ART PRACTICE AND ANTHROPOLOGY: NOTES ON AMBIGUITY AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL UNCERTAINTY

Thera Mjaaland

When established as a subdiscipline to social anthropology in the 1970s, visual anthropology came to mean film, not photographic still images. In spite of situating the filmmaking process in an intersubjective ethnographic encounter, observational ethnographic film—entailing remnants of a positivist attitude toward objectivity that deal with photographic representation as evidence—did not inspire a revisioned use of still photography in modern anthropology. Similarly, the increased focus on the archival ethnographic image from the perspective of asymmetrical power relations was—together with the postmodern discussions of the photograph's truth-value, which took place as photography pushed its way into the contemporary art scene—not conducive to a reentering of the photographic still image in anthropological research. Relegated to a use as *aide-mémoire*, the photographic still image continues to inhabit an inferior position within anthropological texts, not least due to the insignificant role these, most often amateurish, visual illustrations from the field play in anthropological analysis. Rather, being aware of the illusions about objectivity implied in photographic representation, Fredrik Barth emphasized the distraction that taking photographs represents for the full immersion in participant observation during fieldwork.[1]

Based on the discouraging outcome of her own (inadequate) photographing during fieldwork, Kirsten Hastrup also argued that still photography was not able to transform the sensory experience and totality of a social event into a two-dimensional photographic image.[2] Hastrup used this realization to assert that text and visual representations in anthropological research assume a hierarchical relationship in terms of authority. Her much quoted argument hinges both on the failure of photography to provide authentic representation in an objectivist sense *and* the assumption that because the photographic representation is realistic it "*must* be taken at face value."[3] While her argument downplays the problematic aspects of textual representation, Hastrup does point, even though implicitly, to the ambiguity of photographic

representation. As Mary Warner Marien asserts, the photographic image simultaneously confirms and denies truth while emphasizing the appearance of accuracy.[4] It is this disruptive nature of photography and the visual ambivalence entailed which Barbara Wolbert terms "the subversive potential of photography"[5] and which she suggests is the reason for photography's marginality in modern anthropology, since this disorder "tends to undermine ethnographic authority."[6] In the following, my photographs from Tigray, in northern Ethiopia—with the title Ethiopian Encounters (Figure 5.1)—which traverse the fields of art and anthropology alike, will together with the art projects Houses/Homes[7] and Self-Portraits form the practice base for the rethinking of photographic representation in anthropological research that is attempted here. My discussion evolves from the question, if ambiguity is approached as the most potent aspect of photographic representation, what is the role that photography *can* play in anthropological research?

While postmodernist discussions ranged from a focus on aesthetic styles within art, architecture, and literature to a radical critique of styles of discourses and research in general in the humanities and social sciences,[8] photographic representation did not receive much critical attention in the "crisis of representation"[9] and "writing culture"[10] debates that followed in anthropology. However, the postmodern scrutiny of photography's truth-value within art, feminist engagement with autobiography as a mode of reflexivity,[11] and the recognition that science is fraught with uncertainty has, in my opinion, opened up for transgressions between art practice and an academic pursuit in an epistemological sense. Since I started on my photographic art project Ethiopian Encounters in 1993—eventually leading me to the study of anthropology and research that includes photographic art practice—a disciplinary field of art and anthropology has also emerged.[12] For example, in the book *Redrawing Anthropology*, edited by Tim Ingold, a major concern is with understanding the processes implied in different art practices in order to establish "an approach to creativity and perception capable of bringing together the movements of making, observing and describing [anthropology]."[13] Instead of basing the anthropological knowledge project on descriptions of what has already passed, the concern is with the possibility of establishing a "non-retrospective ethnography,"[14] which would also enable a letting go of usual patterns of thinking.[15] Central in this attempt to bring making, observing, and describing together is, therefore, a shift in epistemological perspective that joins forces with forward-moving processes attuned to emergent knowledge.[16] As part of the postmodern critique of representation in the writing culture debate, Stephen Tyler's conceptualization of "evocation" as that which "makes available through absence what can be conceived but not presented"[17] was likewise informed by sentiments common to art practice. As Tyler writes:

> The whole point of "evoking" rather than "representing" is that it frees ethnography from *mimesis* and the inappropriate mode of scientific rhetoric that entails "objects," "facts," "descriptions," "inductions," "generalizations," "verification," "experiment," "truth," and like concepts that, except as empty invocations, have no parallels either in the experience of ethnographic fieldwork or in the writings of ethnography.[18]

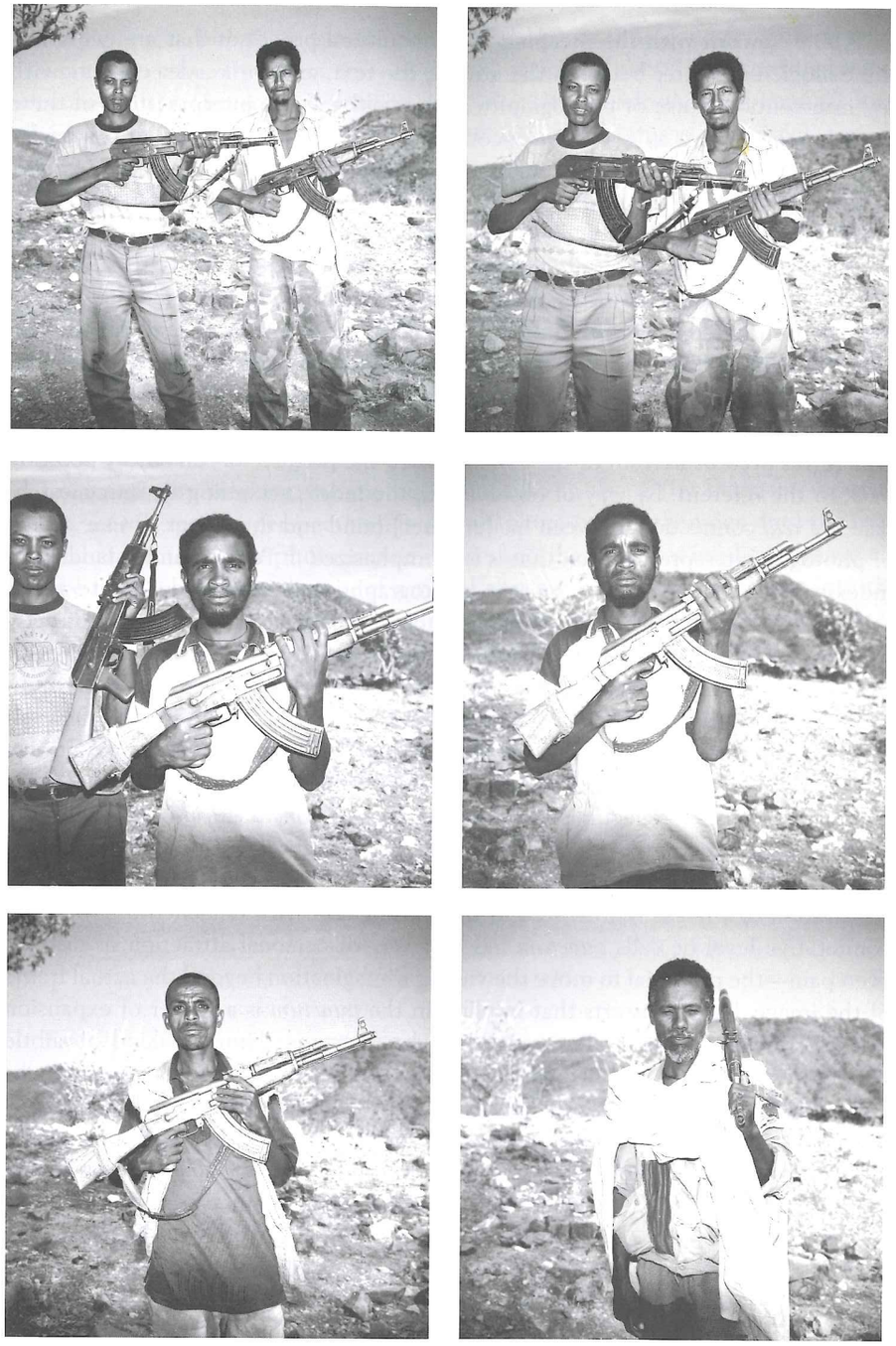

Figure 5.1 From the series Ethiopian Encounters: Mayshek, Tigray, Ethiopia, 2001; Goytom, Gidey, Abrahaley, Teklay, and a friend (originals in color). Photo and copyright: Thera Mjaaland/BONO.

Tyler's concern with the meaning of sociocultural processes that are evoked in the dialogic encounter between the author, the text, and the reader concurs with my interventionist use of photography in the field and the interpretation of these photographic images as "evocative encounters."[19] However, photography's entanglement with realism continues to inform the interpretation of photographic images in terms of realist (and truthful) descriptions. It is in this context that C. S. Peirce's semiotic theory, with the concepts "icon" (likeness/substitute), "index" (pointing to/indication), and "symbol" (rule/convention), has been frequently used to sort out the relationship between the photographic image and reality.[20] While other images are classified as icons, Peirce emphasizes that photographs are indices, albeit with iconic qualities.[21] The reason why the photograph is classified as index is due to the fact that the photographic image not only produces a likeness as an imprint of reality produced by light, but creates a connection to the referent (understood as that which was present in front of the camera when the picture was taken) by pointing back to the referent. By way of observation, the index, according to Peirce, establishes "a *real* connection between his [and her] mind and the object."[22] One aspect of photographic representation that is less emphasized in Peirce's understanding of indexicality is the potential implicit in photographs to point to and indicate something that is beyond the frame of the photographic image and hence not directly (or only partly) observable in the actual photograph. If linking the index up with qualities commonly assigned to the metonym—based on accepted causal links in time/space or conceptual relationships based on closeness that can stand in for each other, like smoke indicating fire—the indexicality of photographs can in a cognitive sense be extended beyond what is actually observed in the image.

Roland Barthes's reflections on photography in *Camera Lucida* provide a link to this metonymic aspect of photographic representation.[23] Opposed to the denotative level of the photograph that Barthes calls *studium* and that involves mere registration of what is represented in the photograph with detached distance, the connotative level he calls *punctum* has—by way of personal attraction or distress, even pain—the potential to move the viewer's imagination beyond the actual frame of the image. Barthes asserts that implicit in the *punctum* is a power of expansion that is often metonymic. He continues: "The *punctum*, then, is a kind of subtle *beyond*—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see."[24] Peter Larsen ends his discussion on Barthes' interpretive approach to photographs—where Larsen links the *studium* to voyeurism and the *punctum* to fetishism—by asserting that "the Photograph is the most ambiguous of all known image forms. Photographs are always closeness, eternal presence, and fullness. And always—at the same time—absence, eternal past, and loss."[25] Discussing indexicality in the context of the metonymic beyondness implied in Barthes *punctum* encompasses the potency of absence in photographic images, expanding the connection made by pointing to, from what can be observed, to what can be imagined.

One example here is my art project Houses/Homes (Figure 5.2), with photographs of mostly middle-class houses.[26] The fencing, in terms of actual or more symbolic fences, points to demarcations of privacy and the need for different degrees of protection. By way of absence in the images, the presence of the inhabitants is evoked in the viewers' imagination by objects left outside and well-kept gardens, which indicate that somebody is actually living in these houses. The visual strategy of including parts of the fencing around these houses also indicates that someone is standing outside the fence looking in. Due to the fact that the viewer of the photograph always sees the image from the same viewpoint as the photographer, this positioning is used to point to both voyeurism and exclusion from these homely spheres. To be a trained photographer means, in my case, to work with the specific visuality created by the technicalities of a particular camera (which is not identical to human vision)[27] and to strategically use photographic conventions to challenge common perceptions. At stake in my art project Houses/Homes is, therefore, more than a realist documentation of fences around people's homes. This visual strategy utilizes the fact that the photographic image is always a fragment of reality, not only in time (by freezing the moment) but also in space (by being a cutout of reality from a specific perspective). By emphasizing (rather than denying) the fragmental character of the photographic image, and the absences implied, the viewer can be involved in the filling in of a visual narrative. This way of playing into the viewer's imagination by indicating a continuation of reality beyond the frame of the actual image has a parallel in the cognitive theory of connectionism which assumes that, instead of predefined concepts, our thought processes involve a linking of fragmental building blocks into loosely defined "scripts" or "schemata."[28] This linking together and filling in the gaps between fragments therefore situates imagination as an inherent aspect of cognition. As Maurice Bloch notes,

> the concept of house is not a list of essential features (roof, door, walls, and so on) which have to be checked off before deciding whether or not it is a house. If that were so we would have no idea that a house which has lost its roof is still a house. It is rather that we consider something "a house" by comparing it to a loosely associated group of "houselike" features, no one of which is essential, but which are linked by a general idea of what a typical house is.[29]

From a connectionist perspective of human cognition, there is no reason to underestimate the viewers' ability to read the photograph as fragment. A conventional understanding of the photograph as evidential description might, however, have trained viewers of photographs to expect an unambiguous and objective representation of reality. It is therefore interesting in an epistemological sense that Wilton Martinez's study of students' reception of ethnographic films shows that the scope for expanding understanding by way of visuals that comply with the realist principles for objective photographic representation is limited.[30] Drawing on Umberto Eco's (1979) distinction between "open" works (or "work in movement") as opposed to "closed" works,[31] Martinez's study showed that those films that were open invited more elaborate and reflexive responses.[32] Contrary to more closed ethnographic films based on realist principles of objective representation—which to a

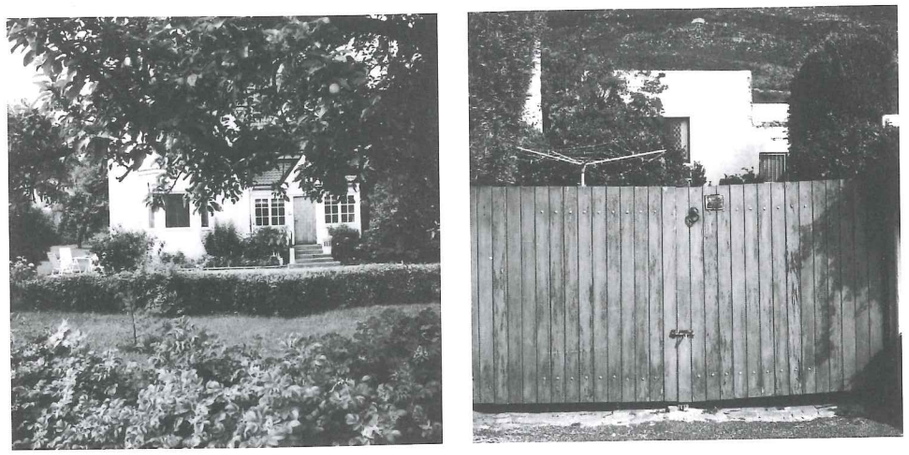

Figure 5.2 From the series Houses/Homes: Uppsala, Sweden, August 1998, and Simonstown, South Africa, April 2000 (originals in color). Photo and copyright: Thera Mjaaland/BONO.

larger extent resulted in the reaffirmation of stereotypes of the Other—the open films used narrative and experimental or reflexive styles, allowing the viewers "space to negotiate meaning in a more dialogic, interactive way of reading, generally resulted in more complex interpretations."[33] This point also relates to what Elizabeth Edwards calls the "ambiguity of the realist paradigm," which implies that "the more general, ambiguous, the image, the more *incisive* it can become in its revelatory possibilities."[34]

These perspectives, therefore, address the epistemological limitations of a conventional use of photography as objectivist description based on nonintervention and a "holism" (from a distance) that, according to Karl Heider, implies "whole bodies," "whole people," "whole interaction," and "whole acts."[35] This is also why Edwards's assertion—that, rather than realist ethnographic photographs, it is the expressive (and ambiguous) aspects of photography utilized within art that are in tune with the theoretical intentions of modern social anthropology[36]—makes epistemological sense. In the same vein, Wolbert asserts: "Working with ethnographic photographs today, then, requires a completely different type of interest, an interest in experimentation and a curiosity about pictures which *disturb our visual conventions.*"[37] In my photographic work that traverses both art and anthropology, my concern is neither with reproducing reality in photographic images nor denying a link to reality but with utilizing the notion of photographic realism and the ambiguities implied to bring about a leap in the viewer's imagination. For example, the portraits in the series Ethiopian Encounters (see Figure 5.1) from Tigray, attempt, on one level, to evoke—by way of the photographic realism involved—a visual disruption of the stereotypical image of the Other: in the Ethiopian case, based on the

hard-lived image in Western media of a catastrophe-ridden and victimized people.[38] On another level, the ambivalence implied in photographic representation can be, and is, used by Tigrayans themselves to produce an ideal self-image.[39]

In the art project Self-Portraits (Figure 5.3), which has followed me around on my travels as well as field trips for more than two decades, I point my camera back on myself at arm's length in a reflexive move.[40] These images, which are mostly out of focus because I work beyond the focus range of that particular camera, have also come to represent rather ambiguous expressions. Instead of ideal images, these photographs constitute what would be considered not-ideal self-representations, which comment on the (Western) portrait tradition. When provided with titles with the names of the places and when the photographs were taken, they also relate to places with their own (potent) meanings (e.g., Eritrea, New York, Ethiopia, Derry), which, while not distinguishable in the images, points to a traveling between them. In spite of blurring the traces of aging because of being slightly out of focus, and without explicating what has actually taken place in this particular life, these self-portraits nevertheless develop a time line of a lifetime when placed together. Hence, these self-portraits draw on the other *punctum* that Barthes asserts is contained as an undercurrent in all photographs—as a painful realization. Precisely because the photograph is a fragment in time, it points to Time, creating a connection with a now of the viewer and a that-has-been of what is actually represented in the image, reminding us of death.[41] Furthermore, if this series of self-portraits is placed in an anthropological context, the reference to place can also be read as a reflexive comment on the "I know because I was there" still underpinning the ethnographic knowledge project.

Figure 5.3 From the series Self-Portraits: New York, 1998, and Derry, Northern Ireland, 2008 (originals in color). Photo and copyright: Thera Mjaaland/BONO.

All the examples presented from my art practice relate to how presence and absence implicit in the photographic image have been explicitly worked with. Hence, my point has not been to reinvent photography to suit an anthropological enquiry more adequately but to acknowledge the inherent "ambiguities of the realist paradigm"[42] as a potent communicative asset of the medium, not only within art photography but also within anthropological research. Instead of restricting the photographic image by objectivist requirements to enable its use within anthropology, a way forward is to utilize its ambiguity—and the epistemological uncertainty entailed—as a potential in knowledge production. This uncertainty can be situated in what Nicky Hamlyn has classified as "places of epistemological doubt,"[43] where habitual patterns of assumption are questioned both in relation to knowledge production and the media of mediation. Due to the fact that photography continues to pose a challenge to anthropological authority, the visual in anthropology therefore presents itself as a *punctum* that has the potential to expand the anthropological discipline beyond its own realist representational conventions, to harness its critical aspirations.

Notes

A first version of this essay, titled "Traversing Art and Science; Examples from Photographic Practice" was presented as a paper in the panel Photography as Mediation, chaired by Anna Laine and Thera Mjaaland at the SANT-NAF (Sveriges Antropologförbund & Norsk Antropologisk Forening) conference in Stockholm May 4–6, 2012.

1. Fredrik Barth, "Hva skal vi med kamera i felten?" *Antropologinytt* 3, no. 3 (1981): 51–61.
2. Kirsten Hastrup, "Anthropological Visions: Some Notes on Visual and Textual Authority," in *Film as Ethnography,* ed. P. I. Crawford and D. Turton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 9.
3. Ibid., 21, emphasis added.
4. Mary Warner Marien, *Photography, a Cultural History* (London: Laurence King, 2002), 234.
5. Barbara Wolbert, "The Anthropologist as Photographer: The Visual Construction of Ethnographic Authority," *Visual Anthropology* 13, no. 4 (2000): 338.
6. Ibid., 322.
7. Thera Mjaaland, *Houses/Homes* (Bergen: Kunsthøgskolen i Bergen, 2000). This publication contains a small selection of this project (which is still ongoing) in its first phase (1996–2000).
8. George E. Marcus, "On Ideologies of Reflexivity in Contemporary Efforts to Remake the Human Sciences," *Poetics Today* 15, no. 3 (1994): 384.
9. George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique. An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999 [1986]).
10. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
11. For example, Judith Okely, "Anthropology and Autobiography: Participatory Experience and Embodied Knowledge," in *Anthropology and Autobiography,* ed. J. Okely and H. Callaway (London: Routledge, 1992), 1–28.
12. For example, Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright, *Contemporary Art and Anthropology* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), and *Between Art and Anthropology: Contemporary Ethnographic Practice* (Oxford: Berg, 2010).

13. Tim Ingold, "Introduction," in *Redrawing Anthropology. Materials, Movements, Lines,* ed. T. Ingold (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 2.
14. Arnd Schneider, "Expanded Visions: Rethinking Anthropological Research and Representation through Experimental Film," in *Redrawing Anthropology. Materials, Movements, Lines,* ed. T. Ingold (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 188.
15. Brenda Farnell and Robert N. Wood, "Performing Precision and the Limits of Observation," in *Redrawing Anthropology. Materials, Movements, Lines,* ed. T. Ingold (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 97.
16. Ingold, "Introduction," 16, and Amanda Ravetz, "Both Created and Discovered," in *Redrawing Anthropology. Materials, Movements, Lines,* ed. T. Ingold (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 158.
17. Stephen Tyler, "Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document," in *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of* Ethnography, ed. J. Clifford and G. E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 123.
18. Ibid., 130.
19. Thera Mjaaland, "Evocative Encounters: An Exploration of Artistic Practice as a Visual Research Method," *Visual Anthropology* 22, no. 5 (2009): 393.
20. Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Icon, Index, and Symbol," in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce,* vol. II, ed. C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958–60), 156–173, and "What is a Sign?" in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings,* ed. N. Houser and C. J.W. Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/peirce1.htm (accessed April 5, 2012).
21. Peirce, "The Icon, Index, and Symbol," 159.
22. Ibid., 162, emphasis added.
23. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 1993).
24. Ibid., 59.
25. Peter Larsen, *Album. Fotografiske Motiver* (Oslo: Spartacus Forlag, 2004), 285, my translation from Norwegian.
26. See more examples from the series Houses/Homes at http://thera.no/?document_id = 116.
27. For example, Susan Sontag in *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1977) asserts that the "photographic distortion"—the difference between the way cameras and the human eye depict and interpret perspective—was often commented on in the early days of photography. Since then we have become accustomed to a "photographic seeing," which is in reality a distorted way of seeing. Likewise, Mette Sandbye notes in *Mindesmærker. Tid og erindring i fotografiet* (Copenhagen: Forlaget Politisk Revy, 2001) that the realism of the photographic image, which is based on both convention and belief, has shaped not only how we see reality but also our understanding of what realism is.
28. Maurice Bloch, "Language, Anthropology, and Cognitive Science," in *Assessing Cultural Anthropology,* ed. R. Borovsky (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 276–83.
29. Ibid., 277.
30. Wilton Martinez, "Who Constructs Anthropological Knowledge? Towards a Theory of Ethnographic Film Spectatorship," in *Film as Ethnography,* ed. P. I. Crawford and D. Turton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 131–61.
31. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader. Exploration in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).
32. Martinez, "Who Constructs Anthropological Knowledge?" 135.
33. Ibid., 136.
34. Elizabeth Edwards, "Beyond the Boundary: A Consideration of the Expressive in Photography and Anthropology," in *Rethinking Visual Anthropology,* ed. M. Banks and H. Morphy (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 55, emphasis added.

35. Karl G. Heider, *Ethnographic Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006 [1976]), 5.
36. Edwards, "Beyond the Boundary."
37. Wolbert, "The Anthropologist as Photographer," 338, emphasis added.
38. See more examples from the series Ethiopian Encounters at http://thera.no/?document_id = 344.
39. Thera Mjaaland, "Ane suqh' ile. I Keep Quiet. Focusing on Women's Agency in Western Tigray, North-Ethiopia," Cand. Polit. Thesis (University of Bergen, 2004) and "*Saleni*, fotografer meg! Om sammenhenger mellom fotografisk representasjon og forståelse av personen i Tigray, Etiopia," *Norsk Antropologisk Tidsskrift* 17, no. 1 (2006): 33–47.
40. See more examples from the series Self-Portraits at http://thera.no/?document_id = 181.
41. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.
42. Edwards, "Beyond the Boundary," 55.
43. Nicky Hamlyn, *Film Art Phenomena* (London: BFI, 2003), 126.

6

SURGERY LESSONS

Christina Lammer

Cutting into a living body to remove diseased tissue or organs is commonly reserved for the craft of surgery. The operating hand is equated with cure or alleviation of suffering and disease. In the operating theater, a field of action is circumscribed. Cuts are made, which lead to wounds that leave scars. A sterile area is created in which a frame is marked, similar to that of an image. The actions of the surgeon—his hands—stay within the sterile area with drapes neatly defining boundaries. In my chapter, I focus on the handiwork of the surgical team. I draw each step of the process, hand by hand, designing a model of the various movement scenarios. Furthermore, I am dealing with my own hand movements as a camerawoman and ethnographer in the operating room.

A Hand Movie

During the period in which I worked regularly on writing this text,[1] I participated as an observer in two plastic surgery operations: breast surgery and facial surgery. The surgeon was in both cases Manfred Frey, head of the Division of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at the Medical University Vienna. I used writing as a tool, a process of reflection, to ponder the experiences I had in the operating room and also while editing to develop a concept that should correspond with my ideas of a *Hand Movie*. I sketched a design for a work process with the aim of creating an artistic video about the *movement material*—a term that the Austrian choreographer Doris Stelzer[2] recently used in a conversation with me—of the surgeon's hands.

> The movement of the hand that draws the outline of a now visible or before seen object . . . expresses best the outer reality of reproductive activity. This movement *creates* the shape of the object as a value. Here is the authorship of the body, the rebirth of man, his incarnation in *significant* flesh . . . This movement creates a significant, positive final boundary.[3]