“About Face”: Approaching a Dialogue of Images and Display

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As a final project for a seminar on ethnographic representation in the anthropology department of the University of Texas at Austin, I participated in a group exhibition in the department’s main seminar room. The room’s glass display cases were mostly empty. The reasons for their emptiness were multiple but, in the main, they clustered around the realization that ethnographic representation, especially in an anthropology department’s public display cases, was a thorny issue. We titled our exhibition Dis-Play/DisPlacement (Fig. 1).

“About Face”

A large part of my participation in the Dis-Play/DisPlacement exhibition was designing a photographic display, using portraiture and text. I brought to the project a keen interest in exploring the junctures of photography and anthropology, including their joined histories, projects, and perspectives. My question, which was in large part the reason for my return to anthropology after an eight-year career in commercial and editorial photography, was thus: What would it take to bring together the representational practices of photography and anthropology to create a responsive and fluid form of representation, one that would draw on mutual strengths and overcome (or at least make provocatively apparent) some inherent contradictions? There is a rich history of anthropology and photography linked as methodologies, techniques, and frames of inquiry. My hope was to take advantage of current explorations in dialogism, and in open-ended, multi-authored texts, and to work such sensibilities through a representational form that utilized the photograph—in particular, the portrait—as a point of focus and departure.

There were many similar attempts to draw from; I will only mention two examples. In 1985, Jim Goldberg did a long-term photographic project in San Francisco. Titled Rich and Poor, this collection of portraits shows individual subjects rendered as “environmental portraits,” or, people photographed within a representative environment. Beneath each portrait appears a handwritten narrative, created by the photo’s subject and based on a viewing of his or her portrait.

The photographer Jim Hubbard, in Shooting Back (1991), reversed one of the standard tropes of documentary photography. Rather than an all-seeing photographer utilizing a valorized “eye” to capture the documentary subject, Hubbard taught homeless and disadvantaged inner-city children in D.C. how to use a camera. He then gathered a number of donated cameras and film and distributed them, encouraging the children to shoot the photographs that interested them. The finished prints from this project were first organized as an exhibition, and then as a book. The project introduced the perspective of the photographic (and documentary) subject into the form and subject choices of the photographic work. In 1994, he produced a similar project titled Shooting Back from the Reservation.

The work of both of these photographers opens interesting avenues for similar work in photographic anthropology. And both have their problems. Reading Goldberg’s book and later articles, it becomes clear that the hand-written texts were synthesized from larger interviews and reduced to fit. This edited text was then given to the photo subjects; they were asked to approve it and to copy it out for the photographs. On the other hand, the projects of Jim Hubbard raise specific editorial questions—what was the process from latent image to
“About Face,” as Photographic Project

I approached these questions first by designing a portrait project and asking for volunteers. To an extent, the original formal design of the project was open to interpretation. I wanted to keep a number of formal constraints to emphasize the choices and differences made within the space of the final piece. All of the portraits were shot in the studio, with similar or identical lighting, background, distance from the camera, and film stock. I photographed the subjects in two groups, and attempted to keep things fairly quick and consistent. Each person was allotted one roll of 12 exposure film for their photograph, and a half hour in front of the camera. Each subject was asked to include objects within the portrait that they felt would extend or support (or confound) the representation of self through the photograph.

The prints were to be sized so that, within each mat, what may be called the “reactive text area” and the photographic image area were the same. The space below the image was to be used to record the reactions of the subject to the image, or to the project—to extend the narrative of the image in whatever direction they might choose. I originally asked for these texts to be written in black ink, in the subject’s own handwriting, at once trying to make similar and to personalize and make unique the marks upon the paper. And I asked that the narratives speak to the subject of identity—imagined as “self” or within a group or structure.

Part of the point was to tease open the split that photography can heal over too quickly, the transition from photographic subject to photographic object, from interacting agent to captured and subjective image. By emphasizing the connections between the photo subjects, their included objects, the text and image in combination, and the act of viewing the pieces one-by-one and as a whole, it was hoped that a certain dynamic would be achieved, one that called attention to the processes and assumptions of reading texts and images, and one that also focused on framing, the photographic rendition, and the act of attention itself.

This framing is worth further consideration. One point of the text component was to transgress the frame of the image—in a material, a narrative, and a historical sense, among others. Framing, delimiting the object of attention and re-presenting it within a controlled space (and over an authoritative caption) controls the venue and options of narrative. Questions provoked by this observation in-

final prints, and who was the editorial force behind the group of photos?

How would one create a similar project that approaches these questions in a different way? That might propose another style of photography and representation able to overcome or at least engage these problematices? The project that follows represents one approach and a number of its challenges. It used a combination of different methodologies to create or recast these questions in an interesting and annoying manner, one that precludes a seamless “read” on images—either as individual objects, in a group, or incorporated within a display space.

1. Bonnie Harrison.
What is outside of the frame? How is my attention being directed? I hoped that, by working with a studio environment, the process of framing would be made evident, would be brought into an active awareness as a considered choice made by the photographer and the photographic subject, rather than posing as a "caught" or "candid" moment.

The project delivered in many ways that I had hoped from the outset. It rendered a small body of work along imagined lines and played with some of the issues and questions of representation and photography. It also played with the processes of display and audience attention and participation. Not only did the text demand an interaction from the audience (and an emphasis on the interpretive act), but the traffic pattern of the exhibit (due to small handwriting and the depth of the case) pulled observers through the display case, making some subtle and dynamic points that I will pursue later. What might prove more provocative at this point could be a discussion of deviations from the project's original imagined and actualized parameters (Figs. 2, 3, 4).

Material Beginnings: Theory and Practice

To obtain the final prints for the show, once all of the photographs had been taken and the proof sheets made, I selected one frame from each sitting, scanned the proof, and made a small, rough, digital print for each participant so that they could think about what they wanted to write before the final prints were made.

One of the participants (an artist, art historian, and anthropologist with a background in photography) began to challenge this outlined form in the studio. After sitting for a few frontal shots, she wanted to turn her back to the camera. We conferred. I decided that, even though my first choice would be a frontal portrait, I would shoot a few “backward” variations to see what they looked like.

When the digitized work prints were made, I sent her one with her back to the camera, agreeing that it looked intriguing. She asked to see the entire proof sheet. I hesitated, and then showed it to her. On seeing the sheet, she stated that she wanted to use the entire thing as her “portrait,” a multiple-image indication of the process of the sitting and the range of possibilities in a final presentation. The argument was theoretically sound, and provocative. I hesitated. The proof sheet was bigger than the image area allotted to the other prints. It not only toyed with the formal properties of the project, it shifted them outside of what I had considered or where, in the end, I was willing to go. Also, it would present one photograph/portrait from the group that was radically different from the others, different in a way outside of the continuity I imagined for the rest of the prints together. She asked again. I hesitated again, and finally said no. She wasn’t entirely pleased with the decision. In the end she used her reactive space to display a quotation photocopied from a Margaret Mead text on dance and gesture in Bali. This considered gesture opened yet another uncontainable array of speculations and possible meanings: a wry comment on the processes of captioning and the disjunction between text and image (and the control inherent in re-presenting representative images), or a commentary on Mead’s work or the Balinese are just two.

2. Guha Shankar.
I don't introduce this clash as simply an interesting or digressive aside. The issues it raised were central, and can be imagined as extending through different domains of representation and signification. In wanting to include the “voices” of the represented, to try and break down or at least make obvious the moves from subject to object, what are the forms and parameters that we set for our anthropological projects?

Admittedly, when talking about a project that partially defines itself by discrete material considerations: images 5x5 with a mirroring 5x5 reactive space directly below, black ink, handwritten text, all matted in white board, each portrait grouped in a single case, equidistant and centered—it makes an obvious and perhaps easy target. Expand this observation to include a few questions: Why frontal? Why is the “reaction” to the final print limited to a textual one? Why language and not art, violence, or absence? It is then that other, perhaps more subtle, constraints begin to be made visible, and the aesthetic choices or controls for the project become a focusing point for critique. It is not so much to call into question the acts and ideologies of representation. Even a formal shift—from text to an attempted dynamic intersection of image and text, presented within a display tweaking and foregrounding tensions of representation and observation, subject and object—is compromised within an overall representative project, a process of producing or editing an Other.

In the editing process, what was used to initially narrow the choices was the discarding of frames that broke a more generalized or normalized aesthetic—frames where the subject’s eyes were closed, the face was in an awkward shift between expressions, or where the subject had moved out of the fairly narrow depth-of-field that I used. These choices seemed obvious and neutral but, of course, were by no means so. Elements from this normalizing field are what we bring to the process of viewing and assessing photographs and are by no means universal. To belabor the point, photographs are never transparent, clear, and unproblematic conduits of the real. Neither is what we bring to the viewing experience, the sensibilities used in assessing a photograph—as art, as document, or as record. While serious attention has been focused on the ideologies of aesthetics (or “taste” and “distinction,” for example [Bourdieu 1984]) there is still room for an examination of aesthetic choices made in constructing structures and formal expressions of representation.

A photograph is a curious and dangerous thing. Representing a moment stripped from time, invested with two-dimensional and forced perspective, subject to aestheticized decisions involving point-of-view, processing, enlarging, cropping, re-presentation as a print, or as a print within other, changing contexts, a photograph represents a decontextualized moment made open to shifting and altering recontextualizations. This is not to say that greater contextualization will solve problems of accuracy, authenticity, and representation. The problem here is not that representations are incomplete or inaccurate, for they can be nothing else. They are always positioned. Shifting the point of their position does exactly that and little else. It does not somehow shed its inherent discursive role. It is true that photographs say less about their sub-
jects than they do of the photographer or the photo-
graphic project. Thus, a photograph can be studied
more for this revealed relationship, between subject
and photographer—and the histories and practices
that inform the photographer's practice—than it
can be hoped to make clear the relationship be-
tween the photograph and "the real" from which it
has been plucked, chopped, and channeled.

Originally I took the conflict over the final im-
age to be shown—proof sheet entire or single, en-
larged frame—as a clash of aesthetics, with a
generous dollop of power and control mixed in,
which, on a number of very pertinent levels, it cer-
tainly was. But this initial realization should be rec-
ognized as just that, initial, and the small tear
created here could be pulled further apart. Not only
to include a closer interrogation of such neu-
tral-seeming concepts as aesthetics, but also to con-
sider the transformation of the subject-made-object,
the surrender of context, and the struggles over the
processes of recontextualization.

Part of this can be read as the contradictory and
transitory nature of image-making itself. A photo-
graph confirms a moment of exposure at the same
time that it fixes it, removing the moment and, in-
deed, the concept of dynamic time itself. The photo-
graph both inhabits and is inhabited by this trace,
and transforms that moment of contact into an
iconic image that begins a life of circulation as an ob-
ject (Appadurai 1986). Within this extended mo-
ment (from initial exposure to finished print) is
sketched the transition from subject to object, a
transition that parallels anthropology's own prob-
lematic process from theory and fieldwork to text
and/or images. Or, as Elizabeth Edwards notes in
the introduction to Anthropology and Photography,
"in anthropology [as] in photography, the specific
moment becomes representative of the whole and
the general" (Edwards 1992). Deciding which mo-
ments is deeply, ideologically embedded.

By addressing some of the more obvious limita-
tions we can consider some of the questions raised.
The idea of perfectly enacting a pre-conceived pro-
ject design is, in the least, overly rigid if not hope-
lessly optimistic. Turning over the camera or the
final designated wall space to a free interaction
with the concepts of "About Face" would have been a
different, perhaps more interesting project, but it
would not have been my project. On the other hand,
a call for open strategies of self-representation, of
allowing the "subjects" to create their own images of
themselves would only obscure key project is-
ues—project authorship and the restrictions for
accepted and/or edited work. Like many
self-reflexive efforts, the frame would shift but the
parameters of the practice would remain intact. The
responsibility for the overarching project can-
not be completely shed or dislocated.

What to do, then, with the framing practices of
photography? Can one incorporate this technology
as methodology without repeating overt or
subtextual assertions of transparent record, "neu-
tral document," or the "factual" mystique of the
eye-witness?

Two important questions surface at this point.
The first centers on an understanding of the param-
eters of any specific representative enterprise: how
are limits set and what can they reveal? The second
question concerns the re-presentation of ethnographic material. There are other means of doing anthropology than textual representation, or even texts augmented by images. What can be gained by expanding the possible venues of anthropological inquiry? This does not mean simply shifting practice to curatorship, art, documentary photography, or performance but to a synthesis, perhaps, that attempts to cross formal boundaries, leaving questions of closure and containment active and incomplete; or, in a Bakhtinian sense, with neither a first nor a last word, unstable, boundless, and always in change.

While these may seem to be separate points gleaned from this project, they are united through a process one might call re-animation; a re-connection with an active and present sense of now. If, on the one hand, we decry the process of representation as one that tears practice and discourse from the flow of time (Bourdieu), on the other we can see the interpretive process as one that reopens a connection with time and space through the processes of making meaning. Here a poetics of representation can be understood as reaching through, by relying on the structures and shapes of representative technologies.

It may be true, as John Tagg suggests, that photography as such has no identity (Tagg 1993). That it is a context-dependent technology that varies with the power relations which invest it. However,
while context is critically important, it must be realized as a layering of interpretation promoting further, not final, recognition; in short, yet another positioning strategy.

To return to an earlier observation, perhaps one point can be set within a framework of dialogics. The formal conceit of the portrait project was, if not exactly an explosion, at least a transgression of certain formal boundaries of portraiture, texts, and strategies of caption. Formal space was accorded for a subject-reactive text, a challenge, support, or play on a unified thematic that ran through the group of photographs. Concepts of explanatory texts were engaged and the transition from subject to object was highlighted for potential interrogation.

This could be understood as one kind of dialogism, a type that advocates a non-manipulative inclusion of other voices (Handler 1985). But imagining dialogue as such leads to the same fallacies that reflexive anthropology can fall prey to—those that begin and end at the inclusion of the ethnographer within the text, the photograph, or the film. An inclusion of voice, if it stops there, represents a formal shift, a type of citation rather than a type of transformative engagement. Dialogue depends on the structure of an interactive narrative from which the meaning of dialogue (or the meaning made within dialogue) escapes (Bakhtin 1984). But it is a structure on which the meaning is dependent to make its escape. Without such a communicative structure, the meaning excess, or poetics, of the interchange could not occur.7

So dialogue does not refer to the structure of the interchange itself as much as it depends on it. If dialogue ended at the inclusion of other voices within the text, it would represent no more than a formal shift. Dialogics describes more what occurs within and in excess of this communicative structure, and the interaction between the readers and the text, than it does between characters or voices within the text or representation. Here it may be useful to consider how to open the forms of anthropological representation, photography, and display, to encourage and support the creation of a rich and dialogic interchange.

Using the example of the “About Face” show, dialogue can be understood as operating on at least two major levels. One involves the interplay of subject, subject text, photographer, and anticipated audience. Within this level it is easier to imagine the collection of portraits as a project, a reproducible entity able to be transferred to a catalogue or a book. The other level is more contingent, shifting, and vague. It depends on unique formal attributes of display and calls into question genres and activities of observation, distraction, and contemplation8 and suggests that there are other strategies of anthropological representation, which can support investigation and analysis as dynamic and open-ended play.

I hoped two things for “About Face.” First, that the portraits would indeed “read” as a group, that the images and the texts would support and extend each other, and that questions raised by one could resonate within the others. Second, that the experience of viewing the images would extend some of the questions raised by the project: What was implied and involved in the act of observation? How could the triad of photographer—photographic subject—photographic audience be made more obvious? And, finally, how was the transition from subject to object realized as a felt experience?

It was this last question that seemed most elusive, especially as it related to the rest of the group exhibition.
“About Face” as Display Project

The imagined dialogics of the exhibit were perhaps most successfully enacted through the display itself, alone and as part of the overall exhibit. The room was lit in such a way that the inset, glass-fronted cases presented singular pools or cubes of directed, warm light. The cases lined two long walls of the room. The glass doors of the photo exhibit were left open, encouraging members of the viewing audience to enter its small confines. The size of the case generally restricted entrance to one person at a time. Once inside the case, the viewer became part of the exhibit, however consciously or momentarily. The stillness of viewing and the parallel framing of case and photographs presented an ongoing series of almost dioramic tableaux. Also, with a viewer inside the case shifting attention from image to image, and often moving to better read the texts, the view of the images from outside the case was subject to ongoing change, obscuring and then revealing different images and different texts.

What questions were raised by this display form and practice? The design of the group of photographs inside the case sought to tease open a number of realizations, to make the discreteness of the display messy and contested. Over-leaving texts, the separation of glass, solicited audience responses, and the logic of the cases subverted audience traffic. The case worked as an intensifying chamber for the images, but also for the audience. As they entered the two-foot by six-foot space to view the portraits, and to read the texts, they also entered the exhibit as temporary subject/objects. This constant motion, between people outside of the case, those inside the case, and the fixed portraits of the project participants on the inside of the case’s walls, opened up (or at least kept in tension) the distinction between represented and representer, between subjects of observation and an observing body. That the subjects from the photographs were part of the viewing audience (as well as colleagues and students) increased the potential for a feeling of subject dislocation. (Figs. 5, 6)

As a final question: what might this have to offer in the consideration of representative strategies and methodologies, and what can be learned from this exercise?

The idea of dialogics, realized in the spaces and contingencies between canons and modalities of display, representation, and space, creates the possibility that distraction and experience, worked through the design form of display, opens new questions about ways of doing and presenting anthropology. It also shifts, particularly in terms of photographic exhibitions but by no means limited to only those, the point of experience and interpretation to reintroduce a factor of present and dynamic time, reconfigured and realized in the moments of viewing and making sense of the images. (That display or representation can move outward from a group of images, for example.) What is being advocated here is: (1) an active questioning about the ways in which we do anthropology; (2) what that “doing” contains—how it can open different methodologies for consideration, for locating what the work of anthropology is or might be; and (3) the reporting and relating of this experience to both anthropological audiences and others, while keeping the processes of making sense contingent, dynamic, and alive.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. The seminar was led by Professor Pauline Turner Strong. For more information on the project, please see “Exclusive Labels: Indexing the National ‘We’ in Commemorative and Oppositional Exhibitions,” Museum Anthropology 21, no. 1, pp. 42-56.


3. Indeed, the portraits were “signified” on in a number of ways. Five of the eight incorporated photographs, indicating other archives of representation as well as the capabilities of other photographers. In one portrait, one of the included photographs was purchased in an antique store. One used a mask to confront and confound the camera, another “drew outside the lines” by extending her written response across the mat borders. Two chose other, photocopied narratives to speak for them. Two used documents that indicated the informational practices of the state, in birth certificates and alien registration cards. One turned her back to the camera.

4. As only one example of this “normalizing field,” I am reminded of a long-term project that I did at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired, a project...
shooting portraits of blind and visually impaired children. One day, while I was setting up to take a boy's photograph, I was shooting Polaroids to test the light. I shot a few of them. The shutter clicks, the strobes fire with a loud pop, and then you wait for sixty seconds while the image develops. Jaime, the boy, asked what I was doing, so I told him. “You're taking instant pictures?” “Yes.” “Can I see one?” He held out his hand and I handed him a Polaroid. Jaime is blind. He held it in both hands, turning it over, feeling the picture's smoothness and the sharpness of its edges. “This is a good one,” he said, and passed it back.

5. An admission that admittedly raises the hoary and problematic heads of “authorship,” “ownership,” and “intellectual property.”

6. Obviously, when anthropological subjects want to make their own self-representative images they can and do, without the suggestions or prompting of a photographer or anthropologist.

7. Poetics can be realized as the excess of communication, that which escapes and exceeds the form of the communicative act, elevating or transforming communicative action into artistic resonance. See Jakobson (1960), Kristeva (1980) or Bachelard (1969), for example.


References


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