

Strangely Familiar: A Visual Dialogue

“As the eye, such the object” –William Blake

“Photographers wish to liberate themselves from their cultural condition and to snap their prey unconditionally. For this reason, the photographic tracks through the jungle of Western culture take a different route from those through the jungle of Japan or those through an underdeveloped country. In theory, cultural conditions seem, to a certain extent, to emerge ‘in negative’ in the photograph, as acts of resistance that have been avoided”
– Vilém Flusser

“The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular” –Donna Harraway

Freetown, Sierra Leone, June 19, 2010:

There is a memory I often return to, of a woman in Freetown walking through an intersection that I can hardly make sense of. She moves toward our bus, blocking the middle of this intersection, but she neither seems concerned nor surprised that her path is diverted. She is wearing a white shirt and a black skirt, with a chic little black handbag tucked up under one arm, blue flip-flops on her feet. She could be anywhere in the world and not look out of place, but she is so supremely in command of these surroundings that you could never put her anywhere else without changing her entirely. It’s a memory I have to question, seeing as how I have a photograph of the Freetown woman that I was able to take from the safety of the bus: closed off and behind windows, I never had to confront her with the knowledge of a stranger photographing her. This photograph restructures my memory around the whole scene, as now I can dwell in it differently, imagining more interaction and contemplation than there may have been in the moment to begin with. But it’s a powerful memory nonetheless both of myself as stranger and as photographer, and of this woman as subject and object of my sight. What gets taken away in capturing these

moments without the consent of the people being photographed? What does it mean to share these photos and extend the original 'in-sight' outward, even further from its particular time and space? Does it change the meaning of the photograph to be aware of these ethical tensions? Can the photographer or the photographed ever again speak for themselves?

Bangalore, India, July 23, 2011:

There was a familiar trepidation when the plane touched down in Bangalore: what will my first vision of India be? Invariably, if one is flying, the inside of the airport terminal will be one's first encounter with whatever place you've arrived to. However, there is a game I play with myself in all of these points of arrival: I tell myself it's not official until I'm in the open air beyond the airport gates.¹ I would tell myself: this is where the transition through spaces ends and the experience of place begins. But the question then becomes, what is it that is informing how am I experiencing this place? What solidifies in the movement from space to place, both geographically and imaginatively? What signs and signifiers do I call upon to interpret and catalogue the new and the different? What can I never experience because my contextual and contingent "observing rules, codes, regulations, and practices" are too rigidly defined or too firmly entrenched (Crary 6)? How will camera reinforce these ideas of a world ontologically and epistemologically located elsewhere? In the Bangalore airport, I remembered my own words, written in a journal a year ago on a bus in Freetown; they seemed so inadequate to describe all that I was experiencing then too, and they haunted me now:

¹ This is an interesting game in and of itself—to reject the familiar sites of an 'international' airport that looks like every other airport—that speaks volumes about globalizing homogenizing forces that I would rather ignore lest they taint an 'authentic' experience.

How can I describe this bus ride to you? There is no time to adjust to the torrent of images, of quickly passing and fading life and land, into the window frame and out just as quickly, in a flattened undeviating chain without the depth or fullness they are in fact immersed in and emerge from—without that depth or fullness familiarity might account for. And so what I'm left with are the 'knowledges' of the people and place I carry in with me—and that knowledge is overwhelmed by the story of the war, of the minds mutilated and the limbs cast off, context-less. And in every mound of earth that rises up from the roadside clay, I bury and unbury another body, entombing and exhuming my own significance. Is this ethical attendance? Is this tragedy pornography? Is this the worst kind of intellectual tourism? What do I do with the thoughts that gather uninvited but certainly not unconditionally? I wish you were here—these words will be even less legible than the distance they travel. (Personal Journals, June 21, 2010)

I wondered at where I stood then, a year after Sierra Leone, a year spent in between these two places at home in Seattle: was I asking these questions again with any better understanding? Did I bring new depth to my experience of being there, in conversation with where and how I located home?

Seattle, Washington, April 10, 2012:

The University was so familiar by now that I hardly noticed its fluctuations anymore—cherry blossoms, now interspersed with sprigs of green leaves, the pink dusting of petals underfoot, the faces of so many human beings strange to me but easily passing as students. It took me by surprise to round the corner onto Red Square and suddenly be assaulted by memory. A silhouette, vaguely describing a woman's form, jarred me out of

oblivious awareness of familiar surroundings: I drank her in and filled her up with all the enthusiasm and confusion of Bangalore, gesturing as she did toward the same silhouette of a woman that welcomed us every day into the Alliance Française that hosted our classroom space for four weeks in India. I couldn't stop the flood of memories that quickly colonized her evacuated form. I wondered at the presence of this object, at this art installation in Red Square (because when I looked further I could see her sisters scattered around at various other points, intersecting the paths of other unsuspecting students and visitors). All I could read off of her from this vantage point was the word "Washington." This seemed obvious to me, seeing as she stood here in the University of Washington. I walked around her two-dimensional body to the other side, looking for more information. An angry red body met me (no longer the black of shadow and absence on the anterior), and a plaque that read:

Emily May Jacobson

Age 20

March 8, 2004

Kirkland, WA

Emily Jacobson was murdered in her Kirkland home on March 18, 2004. She was strangled by her boyfriend as she attempted to leave the relationship. Written in his blood in a large painting in the apartment was "never say die" and "I love my family." Emily was a 20-year-old woman with her whole life ahead of her. She was an outgoing, fun loving woman who cherished her friends and family.

I was pushed out of my own codes of connotation and confronted with the artist's representational intentions and the spectre of this young woman. I could not square the way I applied meaning to this symbol and what she was meant to stand for. I also couldn't

help but feel disturbed by the rupture, by this generic gesture toward the female form standing in for domestic violence (and erasing all other possibilities for the experience of such violence). Was I wrong to read this differently? Was there room for both interpretations? What violence did I do to this image, what violence was done unto me? How do we maintain control over the images we release into the world, or if that is impossible, how do we observe and read with integrity? How do we remember ethically?

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How we see defines what we see: our vision is organized by the conditions of our existence, by history and by context. My journeys in and through photography are in some ways liberated by this knowledge, in the sense that if I bring an awareness of this conditioning and relationality to my work I can aim to disrupt the ways the camera can extend privilege, power and objectification. But in both Sierra Leone and in Bangalore, I attempted to disrupt this extension by overcoming or eliminating it altogether. In traveling, my positionality as a white American student allowed me access to a mobility that many others might never experience—the ability to ‘study abroad,’ the almost unlimited access a US passport provides, the resources of a University that opens doors and eases many forms of movement and exchange. This created an ethical unease I could not ignore. Moving through that unease was exceedingly important to me, so that I might better understand it—more specifically, the structural oppression that scaffolds and seeks to invisibilize it. In Zahid Chaudhary’s discussion of the imperial techniques of manufacturing images of empire, he points out that “aesthetic forms allow permeability between the sensing subject and the world, but in this traffic between things and thoughts, perceptions and conceptions,

the material and the immaterial, certain elements must be filtered out” (11-12). In other words, there is no pure ‘seeing’ of a thing, but rather a process of looking that necessitates processes of meaning-making that transform *perceiving* into *conceiving*, sensation into intellection. This process of sedimenting vision—where knowing is suspended and experience is still raw, only to be separated and settle into discrete entities—necessarily filters and buffers experience. Roland Barthes contends that this raw experience is perhaps only theoretical, and the photograph can only capture the fixing of meaning already occurred: if “there is no perception without immediate categorization, then the photograph is verbalized in the very moment it is perceived; better, it is only perceived verbalized” (“The Photographic Message,” 28). Chaudhary speaks more broadly of the aesthetic form that is the processing and arrangement of stimuli into sense, into meaning, and that “the terms under which aesthetic forms perform this kind of shielding and filtering—however inevitable and necessary—are places where politics enters into the business of sensing and making sense of the world” (12). Wherever this fixing of meaning occurs between looking and photographing, seeing is implicated and indeed complicit in acts of deciphering and rendering legible according to our own situated, historical and political codes of connotation. In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu elaborates on the conception of the work of art—at the moment where the work meets the viewer, wherein “the act of deciphering [...] merges with the cultural code which has rendered the work perceived possible” (215). Significantly, Bourdieu situates the viewer within a triangulation of sensation, intellection and intention: the artist, working within her codes of connotation, imparts a trace of this into her work. The viewer, whether located within this cultural code or not, contends both with her own codes and that of the artist. When viewing a photograph, however, the viewer must also attend to those indexical traces contained

therein. As Vilém Flusser emphasizes, “the structure of the cultural condition is captured in the act of photography rather than in the object being photographed” (33-34). If a pure or unmediated seeing is impossible, then practices of looking and conceiving must incorporate an awareness of this constellation of cultural codes and conditionality in order to approach an ethical reciprocity of visual exchange.

At any given moment of visual exchange, signs are being activated both multi-dimensionally and multi-directionally; in *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger posits that “if we accept that we can see that hill over there, we propose that from that hill we can be seen. The reciprocal nature of vision is more fundamental than that of spoken dialogue” (9). These moments of visual exchange are complicated by a camera’s mediation, where the looking from one side is captured and frozen, forever silencing the dynamism of the original interaction and weighting the reciprocal seeing asymmetrically. The interaction becomes flattened, made static, and all the more insidious for its photographic gesture toward ‘reality.’ Bourdieu claims that it almost always inevitable that the work of art will be misunderstood when the artist and art viewer do not share the same cultural milieu:

The conditions that make it possible to experience the work of art (and, in a more general way, all cultural objects) as at once endowed with meaning is totally excluded from the experience itself, because the recapturing of the work’s objective meaning (which may have nothing to do with the author’s intention) is completely adequate and immediately effected in the case—and only in the case—where the culture that the originator puts into the work is identical with the culture or, more accurately, the *artistic competence* which the beholder brings to the deciphering of the work. (216, original emphasis)

If the act of photographing as ‘the experience itself’ is never commensurate with the reading and deciphering of the photo as ‘the work of art,’ what possibilities might be excavated at the intersection of index and affect? If we imagine that ‘artistic competence’ is not meant to stratify elite from common viewers, but rather that this call for competence should discourage the viewer from looking lightly, then the experience of the work of art might shift toward a more radical exchange of meaning. And because the work’s ‘objective meaning’ is never recoverable (if it ever existed outside of subjective experience in the first), the exchange of subjectivities might be all the more meaningful for the artist’s and the viewer’s intentional foregrounding of each her own cultural conditions.

Taking photos abroad was filled with contradictions and discomfort—no matter the consciousness I brought to where and when I took a photograph, I was constantly working against the objectifying optical regime of travel photography and all its attendant historical injuries. This was in so many ways an impossible task—as Foucault notes, there is no working outside of the camera’s “forms [that] cannot be dissociated from its peculiar functioning” (Crary 71). Jonathan Crary elaborates on the situated nature of technology and of regimes of seeing, locating the observer in “the field on which vision in history can be said to materialize, to become itself visible. Vision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product and the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures of subjectification” (5). I was engaged in the struggle to dismantle the orientaling practices of photography—both past and present—in order to ameliorate and expunge the discomfort of photographing abroad as a white American tourist and student. In looking back at the photographs, I am

confronted with my failure to achieve this; furthermore, my representations-made-material challenge my immaterial remembering.

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Sierra Leone, 2010: The Photo I Took

In our first days in Sierra Leone, we experienced Freetown, the country's capital city, from the inside of a bus. We were not allowed to walk around the city, or allowed to be apart from the group. We were told Freetown was not dangerous—contrary to popular conceptions of Sierra Leone and the blood-soaked history of the diamond trade—but we were tethered together by University rules and shielded within a bus as if popular Western conceptions might be more accurate. Almost every time I lifted a camera to my eye, locals would imitate my gesture as if to say, “more white tourists with cameras for eyes.” The wash of guilt and shame was powerfully dissuasive. At the same time, I felt the equally strong impulse to capture what it was I was seeing, to mark in some way what I was feeling: I imagined no other way to describe and convey experience. Words in a journal couldn't possibly suffice, I told myself. I needed some sort of documentary evidence, and so I convinced myself to continue taking pictures.

In *The Vulnerable Observer*, Ruth Behar questions this process of documentation in anthropology:

We write fieldnotes about all the things we've misunderstood, [...] so much the bare surface of life. And then it is time to pack out suitcases and return home. And so begins our work, our hardest work—to bring the ethnographic moment back to resurrect it, to communicate the distance, which too quickly

starts to feel like an abyss, between what we saw and hear and *our inability, finally, to do justice to it in our representations.* (9, my emphasis)

This process of writing the distance, or photographing it as it were, becomes impossible when one imagines that it is necessary and possible to bridge the gap, especially if the gap is perceived to be the distance between there and here, rather than the distance between the ethnographer's experience and the viewer's/reader's experience. The former is impossible and even unethical to attempt to achieve. Behar arrives at a similar conclusion about anthropology's possibly for extrospection: anthropologists do less the work of telling us about others and more the work of revealing themselves, where "fieldnotes become palimpsests, useless unless plumbed for forgotten revelatory moments, unexpressed longings, and the wounds of regret" (9). Communicating the distance through photography becomes all the more insidious for the photograph's perceived capacity for objectivity, for its "evidential power. In the image [...] the object yields itself wholly, and our vision of it is *certain*" (Barthes 106, original emphasis). While an evidential inscription of sorts is certainly embedded within any photograph, the 'realities' conveyed are always framed and focused by the guiding hand of the photographer. These realities are conversant with the photographer's own points of reference, her own 'eradicable subjectivity' (Edwards 2).

This subjectivity is not restricted to the contents of the photograph, but exceed the bounds of the material frame. Photography as practice and photographs as objects participate in networks of exchange and exist within structures of meaning-making. This situated-ness is as critical to understanding as is the substance and subject of the photograph itself: "we have to follow things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectory. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things"

(Appadurai 5). Taking photographs in Sierra Leone was firmly rooted within touristic and archival practices of collecting experience and documenting difference, where difference was in conversation with what I imagined to be familiar, to be digestible, to be explainable and home-like. I was collecting souvenirs as much as I was collecting evidence.

Susan Stewart describes the twin process of preservation and reduction in photographic souvenirs:

The photograph as souvenir is a logical extension of the pressed flower, the preservation of an instant in time through a reduction of physical dimensions and a corresponding increase in significance supplied by means of narrative. The silence of the photograph, its promise of visual intimacy at the expense of other senses [...] makes the eruption of that narrative, the telling of its story, all the more poignant. For the narrative of the photograph will itself become an object of nostalgia. (138)

She is speaking here of the family photograph, where “all ancestors become abstractions, [...] all family trips become the same trip—the formal garden, the waterfall, the picnic site, and the undifferentiated sea become attributes of every country” (138). But what of the travel photograph? What abstracted narratives of *others over there* supplant the specificities of the person and the place in a specific moment in time? What is lost in the process by which the contextual ‘here’ of photographer and subject, of people, becomes the abstracted ‘there’ of souvenirs, the reductive ‘them’ of photographs? Geertz rather plainly supplies, “We lack the language to articulate what takes place when we are in fact at work. There seems to be a genre missing” (44). To return to Stewart’s comparison, the flower as it is experienced in situ—the networks of roots and microbes that support it, the smell that pervades the air around it, the observer’s isolation of that single flower amongst many—

these are the 'here' of experience. But photographs restructure memory as much as they anchor it: the Freetown woman is reduced to what the photograph chooses to remember. The excess of experience is sloughed off by memory. Taking the photograph, picking the flower and removing it from its context, these acts mark less the evidence of place; rather, the enactor marks a moment of affective feeling, attempting to preserve an immaterial longing in a fixed form. The pressed flower is not revived but that does not mean it does not speak. What become crucial are the questions you ask of it.

Chaudhary takes up Stewart's discussion of souvenirs, but elaborates on the process of taking tourist photos: "if habit secures a certain map of the world, making it manageable and legible to the senses that would be overwhelmed otherwise, then the touristic photographic shots, sometimes snapped obsessively, become a kind of buffer against such an overload of signification and sensory stimulation" (21). Is this signification recoverable within the frame? Once deferred, what is redeemable? In the photo of the Freetown woman with the blue flip-flops, how do I write back into the frame the inner struggle I experienced over taking photos from inside the bus? How do I exhibit my own flaws and feelings, how do I render myself present with flesh and depth? Can I work against my own flatness, against her flattening at my hands? In the photo of the four women on the front porch, how do I tell the story of Yai Mary and the orphan baby, or of Desmond's mother with her leveling gaze, while also telling the story of my own despair at learning that this child would most likely not survive the week because no mother in the village could spare him breastmilk without endangering their own infants' lives? How do I present my viewers with my shame at *needing* to take that picture, of feeling compelled to materially remember both my horror at this child's fate and my awe at Mary and her daughter Sarah's generosity and bravery at taking this child in, knowing that he would not survive?

How do we account for the much greater distance between the photographer and the viewer of such touristic photographs? Because with family photographs, practices of sharing most often center around the family, the extended family and friends—all certainly familiar to some extent if not with the specific people populating the photographs then at least with the ‘object(s) of nostalgia’ and the signs and signifiers required to ‘read’ them. But when those subjects of photography are unknown and illegible even to the photographer, how does the viewer confront and consume such difference? I know next to nothing about the woman I photographed shelling granat (peanuts), except that she lived with Pa Sori on the outskirts of the village, ostracized for his blindness. She was sitting alone, in front of a corrugated tin panel that had fallen from the roof, preparing food and unengaged with our group. I asked her if I could take her picture, gesturing to my camera and pointing to her. She raised her hand, palm flat and facing me, in a gesture of clear refusal. I handed her a thousand leones—the equivalent of about 25 cents US. She gestured again as if to say ‘if you must,’ but was no longer looking at me. I took the photo. I walked away.

In Sierra Leone, I asked myself as an observer and a photographer, how can I translate this experience of difference mediated by my camera without attaching or uploading meaning onto it? I realized later this was an impossible and even unethical task, in that I refused to acknowledge the meaning I was already imbuing just in focusing and aiming my photographic gaze. I was inundated by the ambiguity of what I was seeing—my mind scrambled to put together pieces of a puzzle I could never hope to complete. Could I capture this ambiguity of meaning without suggesting a way to read it and therefore tame it? I struggled against both my own impulse to buffer and filter via photographs and a propensity to explain in order move on and through the ambiguity and discomfort. I did not

want to let the discomfort of photography abroad stick me within an ethical morass that would leave me without an experience to share. But the experience I wanted to share competed with the ambiguity that left me speechless, rendering a photograph all the more powerful (and dangerous) for the things it could say without my words.

Once we traveled north up-country to Kagbere and settled into the village, this ethical crisis seemed lessened as we were getting to know so many of Kagbere's residents. We spent almost the entirety of our trip in this village where we got to know a large number of its residents at least by name if not more personally. This relationship did not erase the circumstances of our being there or ease the awareness of disparity—the global systems of power and exchange and circulation that sanctioned our 'traveling to'—but it ameliorated the acute sense of discomfort that comes with photographing people and place that solidifies one's being set apart from (and objectification of). If *how* we see in many ways defines *what* we see, then the people in Kagbere could be more than masks of difference in the lens of my camera because I knew them as more than vague apparitions of difference in a Western imaginary construction of 'Africa' and 'Africans.' At least I comforted myself with that thought: because I knew something of each my subjects, *who* I photographed would align better with *what* would materialize in the frame. While many of my photographs speak to the friendships and familiarity I established while there, more than a few of my photographs haunt me, unsettling an easy memory of my time there.

Bangalore, 2011: The Photo I Didn't Take

In Bangalore, we were a group of 25 students staying in a city of 5 million people. The people we spent the most time with were each other, moving about the city sometimes in smaller groups but ultimately passing through the city set apart. Taking pictures in this anonymous setting was fraught with tension and unease; how could I see beyond the ideas

and assumptions of Bangalore (and India, more imaginatively) I brought with me? What could I draw on to see differently, if not those more intimate relationships that I was able to turn to in Kagbere? Unlike Kagbere, where my relationships with people afforded me, at the very least and if I chose to do so, the ability to ask permission to take a photograph, in Bangalore, I could turn to no such palliatives. I felt paralyzed in taking photos—I could not overcome my own guilt and sense of unease that the camera only seemed to exacerbate. In fact, photography only foregrounded this privilege and positionality as viewable and consumable to others around me; the camera marked me as other. Engagement was limited by my own restricted interaction with the city and its people—if the “observer [is] a distribution of events located in many different places” (Crary 6), my geographical mooring remained rooted in my imaginings of India originating in the US.

While in Bangalore, I struggled against an inundation of people and place; I felt I was only experiencing the city and its culture superficially. In fact, my sight was limited by what I knew of Bangalore before I ever arrived—everything was filtered through these understandings generated elsewhere. Jonathan Crary reminds us that “there never was or will be a self-present beholder to whom a world is transparently evident. Instead there are more or less powerful arrangements of forces out of which the capacities of an observer are possible” (6). Without a new connection to the city with which to build a different understanding, I experienced difference vis-à-vis what I knew of home and how this city converged or diverged from those arrangements of meaning and implication. Amidst such an inundation of ambiguity and conceived difference constructed against the rememberings of home and the familiar, I fell back upon comfortable ways of being that could rarely incorporate a camera; “our eye finds it more comfortable to respond to a given stimulus by reproducing once more an image that it has produced many times before,

instead of registering what is different and new in an impression” (Nietzsche 295). The photographs I was able to take without feeling ethically compromised reproduced difference as a reflection of what I recognized as familiar. A photograph of a market space marked itself differently only in conversation with what I knew ‘market’ to mean at home; it reflected back to me a sense of myself, and in seeing myself, what I then knew to be other. A photograph of a park was remarkable in its feeling similar to leisure spaces in my own city of Seattle. I rarely took photos of persons because I could not converse with their individuality; my representation would only convey a vague gesture toward ‘people of Bangalore.’ What I never confronted in these spaces of ‘should I take the photo or not’ was myself as stranger, as tourist and as observer.

These practices of subsuming difference and fixing meaning were happening in and on my body all the time. In not taking the photograph, I deferred an analysis of how these regimes of looking were always already happening in every moment of interaction. It was easy for me *not* to take the difficult photograph because then I could imagine I was traveling and observing ethically. I placed the onus of wrongdoing, the burden of colonial encounter and exchange, in and on the camera itself, rather than turning the reflex lens inward and confronting the realities of my experience (and the limits to it) with eyes open.

Seattle, 2012: Visions from Somewhere

When I first imagined rehabbing the photographs from both Sierra Leone and Bangalore, I was still operating under this same misconception—that the camera extends asymmetrical power relationships and reproduces colonial and orientalizing processes. I had not yet questioned my function as observer and as (un)intentional photographer. Because I believed I could defer participation in these structures and inequities, I expected that the story that my photos told could similarly avoid or dismantle such asymmetry, that

the 'truth' that they attested to could itself become a form of resistance as repudiations of the 'obvious.' This did not seem to penetrate the mind of those consumers of my images, carrying so strongly those same preconceived notions of difference and otherness that I carried with me to both places (and that I myself also never dispelled). In Bangalore in particular, I chose in so many moments *not* to take the picture that I imagined that the photos I *did* take worked against power asymmetry and the ambiguity of difference, that they stood for ethical engagement that spoke to different ways of traveling in the world where consuming others' exotic differences was neither imperative nor desirable.

Frustratingly, it did not seem to matter either way the state of ease or discomfort I dwelt in taking either set of photographs, immersed in those two very different experiences. My stories of Kagbere were still supplanted with *the* story of Africa—the poverty, the violence, the primitiveness and the *homogeneity* of an entire continent reduced to a single location; my stories of Bangalore buckled under the weight of *the* story of India—the exoticness, the chaos, the underdevelopment and the *diversity* of a place constructed within a Western narrative of globalization and its effect on 'developing nations.' The photographs I took fortified the Story of each place. The idea of these places my viewers already held within them were not complicated in either instance. Though I tried to communicate the very different story of my own experience in both of these places in and through images, I felt I needed the buttressing support of words to penetrate and disrupt those narratives my viewers brought to the image before even seeing them (and that I ultimately unsuccessfully challenged within the photographs themselves).

In *Doing Visual Ethnography*, Sarah Pink cautions against this impulse to erase the orientaling gaze. She stresses that this is an impossible task and encourages ethnographers to work within the parameters for seeing and disrupting these structures

from within rather than trying to counteract or undo them. This is where I am situating my artistic intervention: in the acknowledgement of these structures of power and regimes of seeing, I hope to reincorporate their existence back into the photograph, re-vising and re-visioning this awareness and the contradictions of such moments of exchange back into my photographs. I am also resituating my work not as 'photographs' but rather as 'art.' Taking my cue from Theodor Adorno, I am hoping that my work will disrupt the denial of "the implicitly conceptual nature of art [whereby] the norm of visibility reifies visibility into an opaque, impenetrable quality—a replica of the petrified world outside" (Crary 11). I am hoping to foreground these invisible processes of registering and meaning-making that normalize uncomplicated ways of seeing and, in seeing, conceiving.

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It is as an intervention in perception that I situate my artistic work—as explicit conception. I am exploring the mediation images play between intention and being, between art and information, between artifice and authenticity. I intend to address a number of questions that arise from these experiences described above.

- How does a camera work to organize vision, and what role does the artist's own vision (and it's historical and present organization) play in this process? Is there a space of intervention an artist can make in her own consolidation of vision through a camera lens?
- How do we insert self-reflexivity vis-à-vis difference into the visual space of the photograph?

- What is the relationship between the photographer's intentions and the photograph's life outside of those intentions (i.e., as a photograph displayed for/to other viewers)?

This photographic and *political* intervention aims not to redeem or rehab these photos but to reposition myself back into/within these structures of power and oppression and historical legacy in order to disrupt them from within. I am not intervening in either the position of the photographer or the photographed, but in the possibilities of looking and re-looking and, in re-looking, seeing again and anew. With each photograph, I hope to provoke a re-making of memory and a re-membering of myself as author and organizer of vision. My goal is not to erase or elide the unease of seeing and practices of looking, but rather in foregrounding these practices and the regimes of knowing that scaffold them, I hope to weave a more ethical attending to the politics of looking into both my own consciousness and those of my viewers.

Much has been written about the intellectual, social, historical and political dimensions of photography. There are fierce debates surrounding the meaning and function of photography—its objective and subjective capacities and limitations, if a photograph can achieve an objective reality outside of an observer's subjective experience and positionality, for example. Walter Benjamin, Vilém Flusser, Jonathan Crary, John Tagg, Susan Buck-Morss and Zahid Chaudhary are all seminal writers and thinkers within this literature and provide my artistic work with an important historical account of the development of the observing subject and the ways the camera as a technological apparatus participates in this organization and consolidation of nineteenth- and twentieth-century vision. I am locating my own work at the end (temporally speaking) of this long line of debates, taking as my point of departure the continued relevance of this contestation

in discourse and practice. I will not, however, insert myself into the debate over photography's and the photograph's veracity and authenticity: my stakes do not coincide with a truthful or fabricated image and its (plethora or paucity of) possibilities, except insofar as an indexical photograph as an uncomplicated construction limits the possibilities of other ways of seeing. The theory and praxis of vision and of looking concerns me insofar as it helps to situate myself as an observer—as an observing, photographing artist—in history, but my process concerns the collision between the artist-photographer and the photographic consumer, and my stakes revolve around the possibilities for remaking and reclaiming visual dialogue as an artistic process. Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* is an invaluable text for my purposes as his text explores photography as a photographic *viewer*: he navigates the meaning and implications of photography via his personal experience of loss—specifically the loss of his mother. Photography is not the thing in and of itself, but rather a vehicle to memory, nostalgia and the inadequacy of language that unfolds in his 'looking for' her spectral being. It is exactly this 'looking for' that I am questioning in my own work: if how we see defines what we see, is there space for the photographer (as artist) to intervene in this dialectic between viewer and image? Can an image itself intervene in this process of consolidation of vision as confirmation of *what we know to be true* ('we hold these truths to be *self-evident*')? There seems to be a gap in the literature where much of the discussion of photography revolves around the observer as *photographer*, and/or the image as sign or signifier. As Edwards and Hart point out in *Photographs Objects Histories*, "despite the clear realisation of this physical presence [of the photograph as object], the way in which material and presentational forms of photographs project the image into the viewer's space is overlooked in many analyses" (2). I have found few texts that address the observer *of the photograph* (aside from Barthes) where the

relationship between what the photographer intended to show and what the image-viewer actually sees is interrogated. John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* provides an important discussion of the reciprocity of vision that I hope to complicate in my own work. This is primarily where I am locating my theoretical discussion and situating my artistic intervention—in the 'reciprocity' of vision and in trying to tease out the tensions inherent in this dialogic exchange.

Seattle, 2012: On Methods

This exploration takes place on many levels. I asked research participants to explore the camera as an extension of the body in situations in which the body feels either at ease or uncomfortable, to take pictures in these feelings of familiarity or discomfort and to reflect on how the camera mitigates or exacerbates these feelings. I then used these images as primary research material when I began my own exploration of camera use and photographic production and post-production. Sharing as I did with my participants a familiarity with Seattle specifically and the US more generally, I compiled an archive of photographs that helped me complicate those understandings and feelings of both the strange and the familiar that I took for granted before creating my own works. These images also helped me to explore how my own practices of looking, as well as the concepts that arose from these responses that pricked my own experiences of photography while traveling (i.e., a response from a participant that chose to photograph 'African objects' displayed in his home in response to my prompt to photograph 'feeling strange,' thus triggering my own fears that the images I took in Sierra Leone might fetishize and orientalize similarly). These photographs, taken at home 'home' in spaces of familiarity of both the 'familiar' and the 'strange,' were a starting point for me to explore how the bigger context of 'here' or 'there' interacts with the images produced, and how I might foreground

my own geographical and contextual location back into each resituated photograph-become-artwork.

Bangalore, 2012: On Space

These images become “The Photo I Didn’t Take” piece of my installation, within which I recreated and curated a series of images that intentionally disrupt the ease with which we consume and digest images. “The Photo I Didn’t Take” contains amalgamations of photos from Bangalore and Seattle that speak to a particular ‘dissonance’ I experience(d) in each place as a result of intense processes of othering and differentiation, i.e., a hybrid image of lakes in both cities that complicates ideas of water use. These images are mediated by a ‘second space’—a gallery much like the one the viewer would be standing in but photographically constructed and containing the hybridized photograph as an image on the wall. The viewer has to move through this photographic space in order to arrive at the artwork on the wall, and this dialectic movement is intended to foreground the distance that exists between the viewer and the subjects of the photograph, and to underscore the intense and intentional curation of each image that renders it instead an artwork. This space is also intended to serve as a space for myself as an artist to be present and ‘readable’—as the hand that pushes the viewer further away from an easy reading by creating an intervening space to dwell in, where “relationships within the frame are foregrounded over those stretching beyond it” (Grimshaw 49). If what we want to see (and therefore do see) “is determined [...] by the desire to discover or construct a credible world,” then the deliberate construction of a photographically credible, realistically incredible world is meant to challenge what we expect to see and make visible what we would not see otherwise (Read 13).

This component of the installation means to both disrupt easy reading and rendering of meaning in the seemingly photographic, as well as to challenge the viewer to reconsider the familiar in the context of the strange—what is it about each image that prompts a second look? What are those feelings of discombobulation and what in-sight can one gain about one's own social mooring and cultural ideologies in teasing apart these inconsistencies? What is revealed when one does not go “beyond the image to some new, more accurate register of truth, but by embracing the surface [finding] the way that images supercede the real and the true” (Sturken & Cartwright 258)? In my own exploration of those signs and signifiers of comfort and discomfort, I must interrogate those “associations with other media and other areas of our lives informed by visual images, [...] enriched by memories and images from many different aspects of our lives” (ibid. 2). Sturken and Cartwright further suggest that, as viewers addressed by the image's creator, “we become the subject that we are addressed as” (52) via processes of interpellation. In this sense, I am addressing my viewers as Seattle locals (familiar with the geography of the city), as situated in landscapes and discourses of globalization (as unproblematic), of development (as progress and progressive), and of home (as contingent upon these ideologies). I am *not* however assuming that this is a static or uncomplicated habitus, but rather that these notions often operate unconsciously. Bourdieu takes up both Mauss' and Flaubert's notion of habitus as “an active residue or sediment of [an individual's] past that functions within his present, shaping his perception, thought, and action and thereby molding social practice in a regular way. It consists in dispositions, schemas, forms of know-how and competence, all of which function below the threshold of consciousness” (Crossley 83). By foregrounding these assimilating processes that ‘go without saying’ in the explicit juxtaposition of the familiar and the strange, I am hoping to surface them and thereby

provoke contemplation around this way of locating oneself and situating (and therefore settling) difference. In this way, I am hoping to reinsert agency into the practice of looking.

Kagbere, 2012: On Installation

My second installation of images revolves around the fragility and sacredness of the photographs I took in Sierra Leone. I constructed four 'black boxes,' each containing an image that unsettles my memory of ethical behavior and visual reciprocity in Sierra Leone. These boxes are the second part of my installation, entitled "The Photo I Took." These boxes were clustered in the middle of the gallery space, on a tabletop about four feet off of the ground. "The Photos I Took" attempts to recreate a voyeurism and an unease enhanced by the darkness within the box and the distance the eye travels from the aperture to the image, as well as by the physical discomfort the viewer experiences in bending down to look through them. These images are printed on backlight media and illuminated by a central light source at the axis where all four boxes meet. These four images represent the dissonance I myself experienced in re-looking at my photos from Sierra Leone. I am interested in how I remember Sierra Leone, how I remember the people of Kagbere and my relationships with them, and how those memories are challenged in looking at the photos again. While many of the myriad photos I took in Sierra Leone (or 'snaps' as the kids in Kagbere called them) reflect the friendships I developed with people there, quite a few of them startled me in the absence of knowledge I had about the person I photographed. In fact, many of the ways I produced those images directly challenge that I was doing anything 'different' with the camera other than contributing to the 'same' Story of Africa. These images, in their re-presentation, are not meant to remain uncomplicated—the top of each box opens to reveal the story of how each image was produced, written there on the bottom of each lid (and illuminated by the opening of the box). These stories mean to shift

the focus of each viewer's voyeurism onto my own feelings of disquiet and shame around how I took each photograph. In this way, I want my presence, resituated as story within each piece, to be the object of attention and subject of contemplation. This physical standing up from seeing and opening up to looking aims to activate within each image a multiplicity of readings, lightened (and enlightened) by this shifting of subjectivity. I hope that this extra-dimensionality will complicate the surface tensions in each image and relocate the quest for meaning from the subjects of my photographs and onto my own "experiences of disorientation, vulnerability and ignorance" in photographing in Sierra Leone (Grimshaw 49).

These four images that challenge my own remembering of both experience and intentionality are juxtaposed with a second feature of this part of the installation—a bin full of all those 'snaps' of the people most special to me in Kagbere, along with an empty bin and a polaroid camera for the viewers of the installation to snap themselves. I am hoping to create a way to play with ideas of snapshot photography and also encourage the viewers to be subjects themselves in a sort of viewing exchange. A table with a few polaroid cameras is placed next to the empty bin along with sharpies if people want to add further context to the snapshots. I will be sending these photos back to Kagbere as a glimpse into my own community of people.

Ultimately, I want viewers to be aware of this constellation of seeing *practices* to better make conscious and conscientious looking *choices*. This is why I am making visible the seams of each photograph in the installation in order to destabilize photography's evidential legacy and foreground the observer's contingency. The 'labile and fictional nature of vision' is embedded within and commensurate with culture (Crary 14); as

Chaudhury encourages, “by reading ‘surfaces’ and ‘appearances’ as themselves constitutive of critique [and] by analyzing the cultural work done by the photograph itself (at its very surface), we gain insight into the sensory conditions of possibility that render things visible, and these conditions do not preexist the appearance but are commensurate with it” (32).

The viewer’s act is as conceptual as the artist’s act. This is the space where dialogue blooms and potentiality blossoms. The pressed flower is not revived but the conversation shifts toward subjectivity. The reflex lens looks inward.

* * * * *

Seattle, June 2012: Post-Show Reflections

My intentions with this show were to play with the ways that images buttress what we already (think we) know to be true about the world, and instead to disrupt that reification with novel compositions of the strange familiar that force the inter-actor to reconsider the signs and signifiers they bring to the reading of images, to destabilize the notion that all experiences (and images) are available to us or are comprehensible and therefore consumable to begin with. I also hoped to explore my own manipulation of the camera’s apparatus and the possibilities for subversion within photographic mediums as a necessary part of this re-creation of photographic process and artistic exchange. As a part of my process, I revisited much of my own academic moorings and departure from anthropology. In the same way that the presence of an outsider necessarily and fundamentally alters both the setting and the social dynamics that the observer is located within and therefore dictates the limits of possibility for what that observer can hope to see, the photographer’s presence (whether known or not) cannot be written out of a context in

which a photograph is taken, nor can that organization of vision be absented from the image produced (the reality 'captured').

I was also concerned with the ways that digital culture obscures the trajectories of photographs as objects, their material circumstances and circulation. Practices of looking in this virtualized context [are](#) implicated by new valuations of visual experience brought about by historical shifts in the viewer's subjectivity where "[vision] is given an unprecedented mobility and exchangeability, abstracted from any founding site or referent" (Crary 14). As Edwards and Hart remind us, "photographs are both images *and* physical objects that exist in time and space and thus is social and cultural experience" (*Photographs Objects Histories*, 1). The space an art show creates—the situating of image as 'artwork' rather than 'photograph'—was meant to surface this material conditionality and capitalize upon it by restructuring each image's circulation. I hoped that "in shifting the methodological focus away from the content alone, it can be seen that it is not merely the image *qua* image that is the site of meaning, but that its material and presentational forms and the uses to which they are put are central to the function of a photograph as a socially salient object" (ibid. 2). For this reason also, I decided not to include photos 'in the raw' that I have discussed in my paper, as I do not wish to reproduce the conditions of observing that created the rupture between my [subjects and myself initially and my](#) viewers and myself [finally](#) in the first place. The art show was my intervention in viewing and my reclamation of a dialogue.

These intentions were challenged in the actualized space of a show, where many of the conversations and dialogue I hoped to have with my viewers were restricted by time constraints and a crowded space, and by the conventions of friendship where people whom I was familiar to did not choose to engage me in these kinds of conversation. At the same

time, I was delighted by the conversations begun with strangers, where for instance, one woman noted how these images reminded her of Susan Sontag's conception of 'not being in' and rather observing from a distance in taking photographs. In many ways, the space I created succeeded in shifting lenses and in re-presenting experience, but the visual dialogue only began to blossom. This is only the beginning of a conversation that will continue to develop and deepen from this moment forward, through this show and many more to come.²

I will close my final paper with reproductions of the images from the final show as they were constructed and curated to be 're-seen.'

² I have created a webspace to provide a placeholder for the continuation of such conversations and the beginnings of many others at hellisart.com.

June 2, 2012: The Installation

The Photo I Didn't Take: Artworks



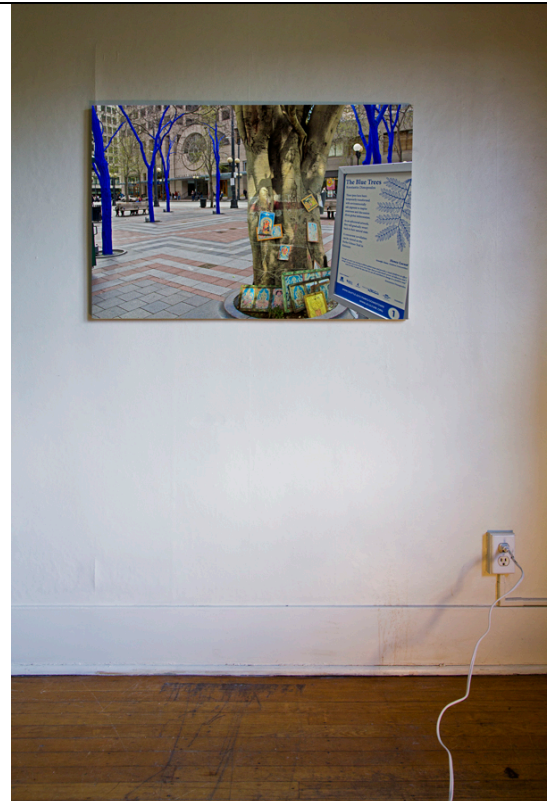
"The Photo I Didn't Take #1"



"The Photo I Didn't Take #2"



"The Photo I Didn't Take #3"



"The Photo I Didn't Take #4"



"The Photo I Didn't Take #5"



"The Photo I Didn't Take #6"



"The Photo I Didn't Take #7"



"The Photo I Didn't Take #8"



“The Photo I Didn’t Take #9”



“The Photo I Didn’t Take #10”

The Photo I Didn't Take: Stories**The Photo I Didn't Take #1:**

This image combines photographs taken in both Seattle, WA at the Pike Place Market and in Bangalore, India, on a market street in front of a dairy store. My intention is to complicate notions of sanitation and cleanliness that are often considered tantamount to development and 'developed' nations. It also highlights issues around ahimsa and the sacredness of cattle, and the ways that those values and beliefs are negotiated in the face of rapid urbanization and globalization.

The Photo I Didn't Take #2:

It was Tuesday, July 26 and we had only been in Bangalore for a few days. We had a lecture that morning about water resources and waste management—and how recourse to either was very much related to wealth and class. This was our educational primer to an experiential fieldtrip to the Subramanyapura settlement and tank—a manmade reservoir, constructed to take advantage of the naturally sloping landscape to catch rainfall and store water for later use. We went first to the tank, which we were told was on the left. I wouldn't have known what I was looking at, if I had not been told to see it, and if not for the concrete pillars apparently corralling its contents and charting its contours. All I saw for hundreds of feet around us was green—a sprawling mass of vegetation uniformly fanning out across the landscape. My eyes were not adjusting to what I was seeing—where's the water, I asked myself. I kept scanning for the telltale blue of water. My ears tuned in the words of our guide, Bargavi, as she explained that these were algae blooms smothering the tank and rendering it unviable for use. My eyes adjusted and suddenly the enormity of what we were seeing struck me. She directed our attention to a collection of colorful pastel houses across the tank, a village she explained relied upon the water in this tank for drinking, for bathing, for washing clothing, but who could no longer use this water for any of that. The construction of private housing in the distance was certainly responsible for the polluted runoff and debris contributing to the tank's demise, but even the detergents the residents used to wash their clothes were at fault. Where soaps used to be made from plant and animal fats, their replacement with synthetic cleaners made with any number of wetting agents and emulsifiers, whitening, bluing and bleaching agents, foam regulators, enzymes, perfumers and phosphates—these cleaners contribute directly to the eutrophication of tanks like the one we were looking at. I thought about the army of chemical compounds that fortify my daily routine at home, and the waste 'management' that invisibilizes the havoc their ingredients wreak on any number of ecosystems. I thought about the lake in my neighborhood only a stone's throw from my apartment, a lake which most people wouldn't dare to swim in, let alone drink from, but who certainly exploit it for its leisure and sporting possibilities. The many number of communities built up around its banks certainly don't live or die by its presence. I thought about our own waste management systems, our water treatment capacities that can convert wastewater into viable water once again. I thought about Seattle and its rivers, fed by rain and snowmelt—the geography of abundance and replenishment. I thought about cleanliness and sanitation and the notion that development is coincident with such practices, that civilizations die and fall by such standards.

The Photo I Didn't Take #3:

This image combines photographs taken in both Seattle, WA at the Pike Place Market and in Bangalore, India, of an underground market. My intention is to provoke thought around the use and functions of market spaces—who uses the Pike Place market? Does it still function within a local community? Are its products sourced locally? How does tourism change the geography of cities and public spaces in both Seattle and in Bangalore? What knowledge or awareness of such changes go ‘underground’ or become invisible? What is relationship between local use/access and local sourcing of goods, and global use/access and international sourcing of goods?

The Photo I Didn't Take #4:

This image combines photographs taken both at Konstantin Dimopoulos' Blue Trees Project in downtown Seattle and in Bangalore, India, of a sacred peepal tree. What is the status of trees in both the United States and in India? What is the relationship between environmentalism and spiritualism? How do we enshrine and monumentalize our beliefs? What does it mean to create temporary art?

The Photo I Didn't Take #5:

This image challenges the exchange between artist and viewer, between what is intended to be represented and what is actually conceived. This image contains within it the original image of a silhouette cutout in the Alliance Française, the school that hosted our classroom space for four weeks in Bangalore. It also contains the cutout I stumbled upon six months later at the University of Washington, which immediately transported me back to India and caused a collision of space and memory in that moment. This image was displayed in the show, with an image of the plaque that was attached to the other side of the UW cutout. It reads: “Emily May Jacobson; Age 20; March 8, 2004; Kirkland, WA. Emily Jacobson was murdered in her Kirkland home on March 18, 2004. She was strangled by her boyfriend as she attempted to leave the relationship. Written in his blood in a large painting in the apartment was “never say die” and “I love my family.” Emily was a 20-year-old woman with her whole life ahead of her. She was an outgoing, fun loving woman who cherished her friends and family.” This experience transformed the ways I was thinking about these hybridized images, and the ethical ramifications of representation and remembering.



The Photo I Didn't Take #6:

This image contains a photo from Bangalore at their celebration of Independence at Lal Bagh park, and one from Seattle, WA at the University of Washington's HuskyFest. I was struck at HuskyFest by this celebration of pride and history that was in fact a gross display of branding and the growing marketization of education and its student-consumers. While commercial exchanges were happening in both Bangalore and in Seattle at these occasions, I can't help but wonder at the ways that globalization and the free market continue to transform our understandings of identity at both the individual and the national level.

The Photo I Didn't Take #7:

The top image combines photographs taken of both the Central Link light rail construction on Capitol Hill in Seattle and of the construction of the Bangalore Namma Metro. The bottom image is not in fact a hybrid image, but an original image of an IT building off Whitefield Road. This is where all of Bangalore's technology campuses are located. They stand in stark contrast against the less developed neighborhoods and communities they encroach upon.

The Photo I Didn't Take #8:

This image combines photographs taken at Dastkar Nature Bazaar in Bangalore and at Northwest Folklife in Seattle. Dastkar is an organization that hosts craft fairs in cities around India, celebrating local artisans and designers and fighting to preserve traditional crafts. Dastkar stands up to the marginalizing power of urbanization and globalization in its resistance against it. It is an organization and a movement for sustainable economy and employment. Northwest Folklife similarly celebrates northwest crafts and traditions but one can find flavors and culture represented from around the world in and among its vendors. Interspersed between stalls of local woodwork, colorful Indian saris, and African masks one can find Geico representatives selling insurance and Comcast employees promoting their company's latest internet/cable bundle deals. Increasingly, the traditional is a tokenized space in an imaginary inundated by global homogenized visions.

The Photo I Didn't Take #9:

This image combines photographs taken in both Seattle, WA at the Pike Place Market and in Bangalore, India, at the Independence Day Horticultural Show at Lal Bagh. Lal Bagh is a public park that exists in a very interesting historical and geographical context: thousands of people from all parts of India and around the world visit the park for this impressive display; the glass house was modeled on London's crystal palace; the park is no longer free for public use most hours of the day; there are protests ongoing over illegal tree felling for the construction of Bangalore's Namma Metro. The Pike Place Market historically served to intervene in rising agricultural prices, acting as a space to 'meet the producer' by connecting local farmers to consumers directly. Now, the market attracts ten million visitors annually. Its vendors provide seasonal fruits and vegetables the year round; the market's place in a local economy has perhaps been superseded by its participation in global agricultural networks of exchange. This composition is meant to provoke questions around the market space, the free market, public use and access and local-global exchanges.

The Photo I Didn't Take #10:

This image contains two compositions: the top image combines photographs taken at a McDonald's-one in Bangalore and one in Seattle. The original image from Bangalore is hidden within the security monitor at the top left corner. The bottom image is the original Starbucks in the Pike Place Market and a Cafe Coffee Day in Bangalore. These images are meant to juxtapose multinational chains that offer the same experience in two very different locations across the globe. While I myself would never patronize a McDonald's or

a Starbucks in the States, I frequented their surrogates in Bangalore, offering as they did some semblance of home and comfort. The Indian tourists in the bottom image are original to the Seattle space at the time of being photographed, also highlighting the exchanges of experience enabled by tourism (where I go to a Cafe Coffee Day in Bangalore and they visit a Starbucks in Seattle).

The Photo I Took: Installation of Shadow Boxes



The Photo I Took # 1:

It is day two in Freetown and we are leaving the city for the north of the country. This is to be our only experience of Sierra Leone's capital city, both coming and going—from the inside of a bus. All of us are flush with the glass, vying for window space to take it all in. We press cameras up against our faces, snapping pictures furiously. People outside notice the big bus full of white people. Some bring wares to sell, reaching up toward the tops of the open windows—small plastic bags of cold water perspire in the 90* heat; pineapple sears piled high on a platter balance perfectly on a woman's head; red plastic buckets yield fresh-baked bread. Some only extend an outstretched hand, palm open, empty. Many imitate our gestures, lifting their hands to their eyes and clicking the buttons of invisible devices—'more tourists with cameras for eyes.' I hesitate to continue taking pictures, feeling implicated. I notice a woman walking straight across a wide boulevard, moving toward our bus. We are blocking the intersection, but she seems neither concerned nor surprised that her path is blocked. In fact, she seems to be the only person not noticing us. I raise my camera to my eyes and snap.



The Photo I Took #2:

Yai Mary and her daughter Sarah sat on the front porch. I see them first and I wave, offering the customary bi chege. Sarah motions me over and as I approach I notice Desmond's mother standing next to them—this is her home but I don't know her name. She stands over Yai Mary and scrutinizes something in her lap. As I get closer, I realize the bundle in Mary's arms is a baby—a week old at the most from the looks of it. Sarah, Mary's youngest, is learning English and had helped me with translation in a few interviews. I ask her in Krio, 'udat pekin?'—I thought I had met all the newborns in the village. She shakes her head. She exchanges words in Landogo with Mary. Desmond's mother overshadows the conversation, tersely, not engaging with me. 'ii no get mami, ii no get milk'. She motions to her breast. I am stunned and horrified—he will die without breastmilk. I am also in awe of Mary and Sarah, caring for this child, knowing he will not survive. I am ashamed because I need to take this picture, without knowing why.



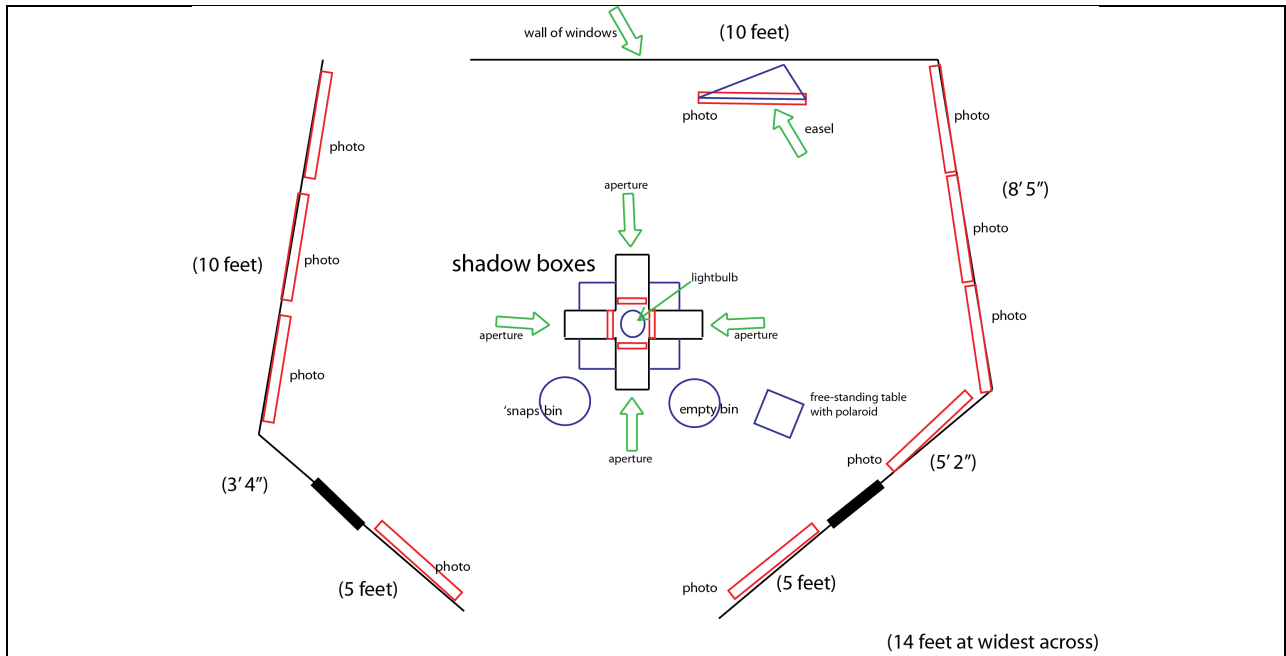
The Photo I Took #3:

Today we are visiting Pa Sori. He lives on the outskirts of the village, accused of witchcraft, ostracized for his blindness. He greets us on his porch, clasps each of our hands in turn and exchanging bi cheges all around. Then, he takes us around the house. A woman there is going to show us how the thick syrupy orange oil used in all Salone cooking is made. She brings us around a big steaming pot of glistening palm oil. While she demonstrates, I look behind us. I see a woman sitting alone, shelling granat. I wander over toward her, curious. She looks up and I greet her. She offers me a few shelled nuts. I experience again the mix of emotions at accepting such an offering. I can't refuse such gifts of food without being rude. I take them in my hand, 'tenki ya.' I gesture toward my camera. She raises her hand in a gesture of refusal. Immediately, I reach into my pocket, producing a thousand leone note—about 25 cents US. I gesture for her to take it. She takes it in her hand. She looks down. I step back and take the photo.

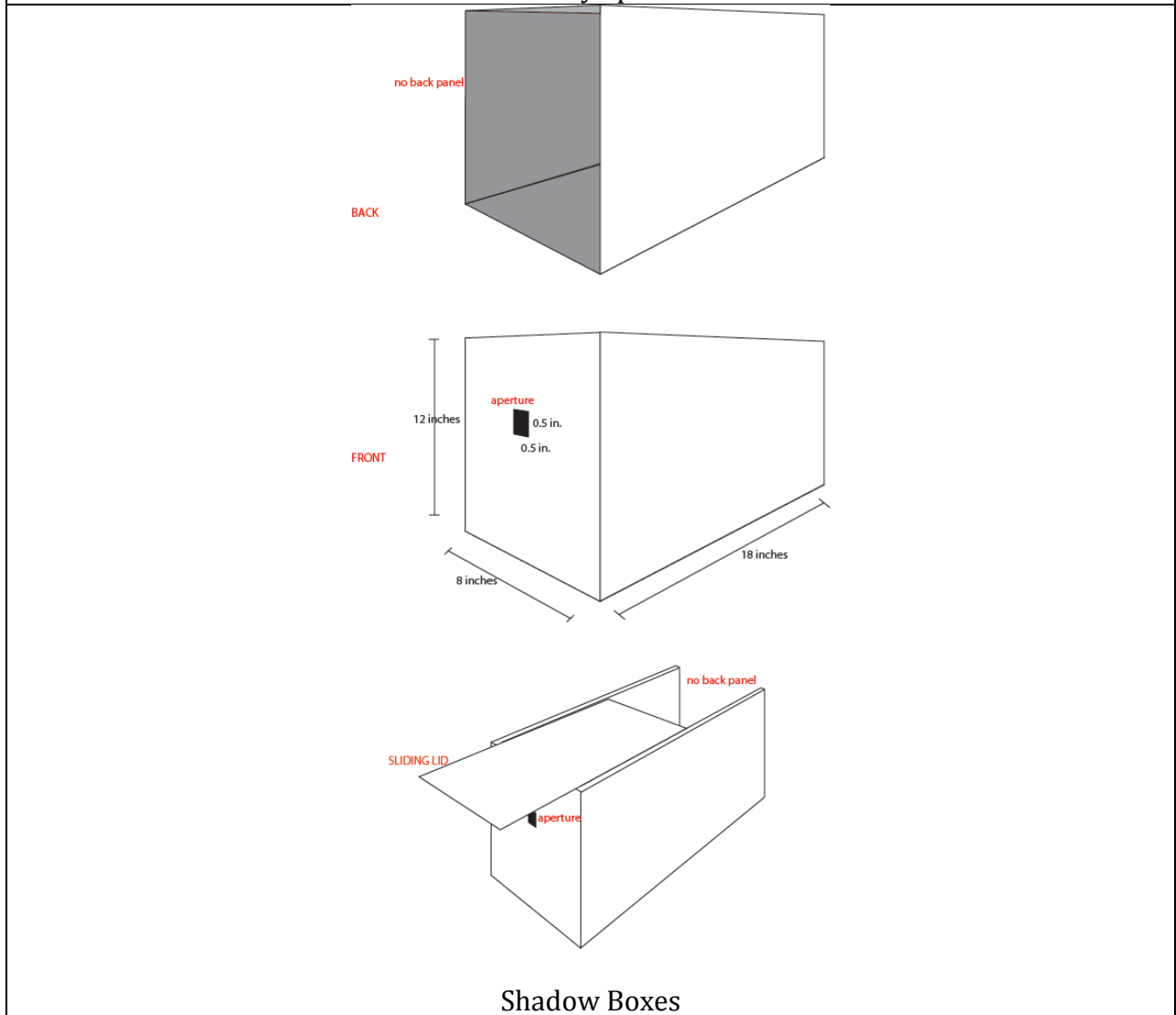


The Photo I Took #4:

We are going to visit a village called Makeni. We walk a number of miles to get there, and as the path opens up into the dirt road of the village, pekin greet us first, running toward our party and grabbing every available hand to hold as we walk in. We assemble in the square where the elders come out to greet us, arranging a ring of plastic chairs and breaking out the ceremonial poyo. The men sit with us while the women and children crowd around us in a circle. I offer my chair to a woman standing behind me and stand as the ritual exchange of words and palm wine begins. A girl climbs up onto the woman's lap, a daughter or a relative, or just clambering for a better view. I lift my camera to my eyes. The woman turns and looks at me then as I take the photo. I am vaguely reminded of Dorothea Lange's photo of the migrant mother with her children, and wonder if I was infusing such content into this frame. I snap out of my reverie when she starts speaking to me, forcefully, and shaking her finger. MC tells me she doesn't want to be photographed. She vacates the chair I'd offered and left. Feeling defeated, I sit down again.



Gallery Space



Shadow Boxes

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