

What does the photoblog want?

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This is a provocation and a puzzle: while social and technical possibilities for photography multiply wildly, there has been a seizure in the critical writing which addresses photography. There are analogue cameras and digital cameras, phones with cameras, cult cameras (Lomo, L'espion), there are websites and chat groups for photography, there is software for the manipulation of photography, printers for digital cameras, services that will print uploaded digital photographs on photo-quality paper, there are websites to which you can send your digital photos directly from your phone – and this is only a small list, a sense of the possibilities. In the writing about photography, however, what you often get are versions of a debate which never fails, somehow, to centre on the status of the Real in relation to photography, although the value-encoded terms used to articulate this debate can differ: reality or confection, evidence or artistry, document or statement.

But despite these consistencies in the literature, a photograph's uncertain connection to the real life in which it is made renders it a paradox at the level of being (what it is), and equivocal at the level of its expressive content (what it means, or knows). What do we see when we look at a photograph? And what does this have to do with what we feel about them? These questions have been often asked. While there is no apparent agreement about the extent that the Real inhabits the photograph, or to what counteracting degree subjectivity asserts itself, there does seem to be almost unanimous (though unacknowledged) agreement subtending these debates that the Real is the real issue. I think Sarah Kember (2003: 203) is

probably right to locate the persistence of this debate in desire:¹ right to locate the apparent lack of agreement in a desire *not* to agree, and the subterranean agreement in a desire *not* to be caught agreeing (or an illicit desire to be in agreement). Roland Barthes (1980) famously writes desire into the theory of photography and into his attempts to reckon with some of photography's effects. He calls the resultant method a 'cynical phenomenology'. So the question can be nicely re-cast: not 'What do photographs represent?', but 'What do we *want* to see when we look at them?'

And now photography is digital – re-invented as one of the 'new' media – and we wonder what this means. The question has sparked discussion, but there is something oblique in the conversations about digital photography.² It is possible to talk about why this might be the case. If it is not clear how the digital intervenes in the representational space of photographs – and it is not – then it cannot be clear how theory should address the digital. There is, therefore, a recidivism in the literature on digital photography (Kember, 2003: 213). With new digital processes, it seems, we return to old theoretical haunts, and so we again find ourselves asking: 'What has become of the Real?' Previously, theory had achieved an uneasy *détente* with regard to the (territorial) status of the Real in photography; not a resolution of the debates so much as an abatement – perhaps a stalemate, perhaps an indifference. Now, with regard to Photoshop and its influences, the factual content of photographs is again taken to be under threat (always this siege mentality), and the question of the Real has been passionately revived. Thus, the Real persists.

This is no longer a surprise. Theories of photography are commonly drawn from, and subsequently re-cast as questions of representation, and specifically, of representation's reach. Questions like: what does the photographic image represent? And specifically, how deeply (back) into Reality do these representations establish roots: to the appearance of the thing, to our mental image of it, to the thing itself, to some aspect of its unique being? As a result of this tendency to tether photography to questions of representation, the trajectory of photographic theory always arcs – and arcs quickly, as if eager to get where it's going and anxious to leave where it's been – from *the act* of taking the photograph to *the photograph* itself, straight from photography to photograph. The habits that inform the questions asked of photography ensure that this path is run perpetually, that whatever the subject and whatever the interests being served, the analytics deployed to address photography are routed in the familiar way. Thus photography itself – as the artefact of its various analyses (which is *not* the only thing that it is) – is made familiar.

The question of the presence and role of the Real – the usual question of representation – packs an interesting assumption: that reality always extends itself, with varying degrees of fidelity and persistence, through the following chain of photographic events, in this order: (1) the choice of

subject (what is to be pictured); (2) capturing an image of the subject (the authority of the button); and (3) viewing the subject as an image (the presumed effect of these processes). One effect of the Real, then, whatever one's stance towards it, is to drive these photographic events forward, towards the photograph as the meaningful object and endpoint of analysis, as if this was where they were destined all along. The question of the Real is not just one to be addressed *through* an analytics; it is, itself, an analytic perspective, one that sees photography (the act) as having a causal relationship to photographs. From an ethnographic perspective – one I employ in the following – in which meaningful activity clusters around all points in a constellation of photographic practices,³ the tendentiousness of this link, from photography to photograph, stands out as odd, as itself analytical and, moreover, as one analytical choice among many.

The picture of photography looks perhaps more like a constellation than a vector; and the Real (merely) travels in this constellation. The photographic practices of a particular group of new media users, photobloggers, both suggest and illustrate the point. Photobloggers are people who make photographs and post them on the web in the form of photoblogs or photographic journals. They are at the centre of this article, and a look at their practices will exemplify some problems that exist in the analysis of photographs and new media objects generally.

Photoblogging

There are now well over a million documented blogs and photoblogs in the world, with most appearing in the last 12 months.⁴ Their newfound popularity has provoked a gentle storm of press, along with a significant number of utopic scenarios in which blogs feature as the next emancipatory mass media product.⁵ The word 'blog' is a contraction, of 'web' and 'log'. Say it fast, elide the gap between the b and the l: 'web-log:' Blog. Verb: to blog or blogging. Noun: my blog. Someone who blogs is a blogger.

Weblogs first emerged on the Internet in any number in 1999. Their initial use, as a page from which to list and update favourite website addresses, encouraged a links-based commentary, which then quickly developed into a form of online journal or public diary (posts are organised chronologically). Worldwide, there are now over half a million weblogs [at the time of writing, there are more than twice this amount], the majority of them written by individuals in the United States. Although other forms of weblogging have since emerged (devoted to political punditry, news commentary, fan culture, business promotion and management etc.), the journal blog remains by far the dominant form. (Reed, 2003: n.p.)⁶

Journal blogs are web logs in which the author chronicles events in his or her daily life. Daily updates are the norm; some people post to their blog

far more frequently. Variety in the content of blogs is nearly infinite, but common topics are: problems at work, unusual occurrences, parties, heartbreak, the beginnings and ends of relationships, favourite bands, trips to unfamiliar places, etc. The things that turn us on. There are varying degrees of intimacy and anonymity in blogs. While most bloggers welcome feedback about their blog (and their life), some are more cautious about the personal information they give out. Most bloggers have a story or two about someone reading something they weren't supposed to read. These are the dangers of keeping a journal of any kind, but especially one that exists online. But most bloggers don't consider blogging to be a dangerous, risky, or compromising practice.

There are blogs and now photoblogs, which are related in many ways, but are not the same. Roughly analogized: text is to blogging as photographs are to photoblogging. It is also true that many blogs contain photographs and photoblogs almost always contain some text. So the distinction between them is not a clear one. A theme here will be the way that these practices – blogging, photoblogging – outrun most attempts to fix them in analysis, in writing. But in a simplified account: blogs use short bits of writing to chronicle daily events while photoblogs tend to use photographs in association with text to tell their tales.⁷ Photobloggers themselves are never sanctimonious in the way they define photoblogging; for the most part they leave the definition to the individual blogger. One website defines photoblogs this way:

A photoblog is a type of blog that is regularly updated with photos. Some photoblogs focus only on photography, while others have photos in addition to other content. All photoblogs, however, consider photos to be an important part of their chronological blogging structure. (www.photoblogs.org/faq/)

As my interests are in the uses of photography as new media, I will be almost exclusively concerned with photoblogs, although there will be places where it will be obvious that blogs and photoblogs need to be, almost can't help but be, treated together. I will therefore sometimes speak of them interchangeably. This isn't to suggest that the differences between them are not significant; it is an index of the cultural proximity between the two forms, the fact that they share production technologies, space on the internet, some genealogical traces, media attention, audiences and often authors/bloggers. I think, for these reasons, it would be misleading to entirely ignore one in the study of the other, just as it would be misleading to entirely ignore the differences between them.

In my research, I have spoken to 30 people who put their own photographs online in the form of a journal or blog.⁸ Most of these identify as “photobloggers” (by that name) but all of them behave, with respect to the websites they maintain and for the purposes of my broad definition, like photobloggers.⁹ Before each conversation, I spent a long time viewing the

photoblogs. These conversations covered: the interviewees' interests in photography generally; their collections of photographs and what they do with them; why and how they first started photoblogging; the technologies they use to take pictures and create their blog; changes that have occurred in their photographic or photoblogging practices since starting the blog; their relationship to the wider world of photobloggers; the kinds of photography they care about; and the situations in which they tend to make photos.

Variables in the photoblogging form include: presence or absence of captions for the photos; presence or absence of categories into which the images are organized; relative conventionality of photographic categories ('my trip to Spain' versus 'how to make beans on toast'); quantity of photographs; degree of integration of photographs with text; size and/or quality of images (related to a site's load time, but also to the quality of one's camera); and degree of protection the photoblogger tries to secure for her/his images ('use anything you want' versus 'please ask me before using one of my photographs').

The picture of photoblogging gets more interesting when we include the doing of photoblogging; and not just *doing* as the means to an end – as the process that produces the photoblog and then disappears – but doing as a product and site of meaningful activity in its own right. Photoblogging and the photoblog both incorporate actions; they also both incorporate some effects of those actions. Each acts as noun and verb and the lines that connect the two are neither straight nor unidirectional.

In talking to photobloggers, a couple of common and important ways of doing the photoblog quickly emerge. First, photobloggers tend to take a lot of photographs; most say that they take more photographs than they ever have, and that the photoblog is not only a repository for these images, but a tactic for achieving just this proliferation. So, they like to have photographs, but also, and crucially, the photographic act – looking for photographs, composing, taking, reviewing, showing – becomes newly enjoyable and newly heterogeneous in the broad context of doing a photoblog.

Photobloggers like, most of all, to make photographs of what they call 'the everyday', the 'banal' or the 'mundane'. These descriptors are a way of emphasizing what their photographs are *not* about: they are not your conventional holiday or Big Occasion snaps, not just about weddings and birthdays. They're not *that* kind of mundane. Instead, most photobloggers say that 'real life' is the desired content of their photographs. They want pictures of life as it happens, as they experience it. 'Real life', photobloggers say, traditionally happens *outside* of photographs, and this is precisely what they want *in* their photos.

'Real life', as it is used here, reaches out for at least one more concept: the digital. It is digital photography that facilitates photobloggers' access to 'real

life'. The fact that digital photographs are free (once the camera and accessories have been purchased) allows photobloggers to take more photos, to experiment and play in a way they rarely did when paying for film processing. What they tend to do under these expanded conditions – and I think this is an interesting and non-obvious choice – is take more photos of what they call 'real life': life as it happens, the small stuff, an intriguing signpost, the stages of construction of a new building, the Thames at low tide, a strange effect of lighting. This behaviour appears to invert a strong claim often made about the digital and its supposed virtuality: namely the claim that the digital introduces a disconcerting fissure of virtuality and indeterminacy into the Real and into our realities. If a photograph is digital, the story goes, how can we tell if it's been altered, if irrealities have tainted the photograph's realities? With photoblogging practices, conversely, the digital prepares the field for the introduction of the Real, for the introduction of 'real life' into photography.¹⁰

There are related aesthetic considerations: by and large, photobloggers don't like flash photography. They actively eschew it, in fact, preferring blurs and indecipherability to the disfiguring glare of a flash bulb. They also don't like posed photographs, unless the pose is self-consciously struck and thus internally critical (via irony, caricature or mockery) of posing, as such. Because they don't tend to like poses, many invent shooting tactics which disarm people's hair-trigger proclivity to compose themselves for a camera: they 'shoot from the hip', they shoot over their shoulder, they shoot when friends' mouths are full, when no one is expecting, they shoot surreptitiously on the train or anywhere. Photobloggers explain their various disinclinations by saying they'd rather have pictures of people as they 'really are'. People don't smile abstractly or pose artificially or glow strobically in 'real life', so why would they want a photograph of such effects?

Photobloggers question what a photograph of someone self-composed and smiling (aware of themselves as a photographic image) is actually a photograph *of*. Specifically, the complaint here is lodged in the small space between the means of representation and what is represented. In their discussions of pose and flash in photography, photobloggers are thinking about the 'real-life' moment when the photo is made and the way this moment inhabits the resulting image. They are thinking quite specifically about the *mise-en-scène* of photography and how this gets traced within a photograph. Unexpectedly, much of the photobloggers' work, pleasure and desire is here – not solely online, not solely in the photographs themselves, but in the activities that occur at the moment of photography, in the way the doing of the photoblog conjures these activities, and the reciprocal way that the doing of photography conjures the photoblog. As we'll see more clearly, their work effects a drawing together: of the desires that differently motivate using a camera and constructing a blog, and of the technologies involved in all parts of the process. In order to see this, it is important that

photography and the photoblog, the making of photographs and the photographs themselves, the camera and the computer, *not* be connected via the usual mechanisms: causality, consecutive temporality or straight intention, although the tendency will be to do exactly that.

Photobloggers manage their blog at home, at work or wherever they have access to a computer and the fastest internet connection. For most photobloggers, this happens anywhere from a few hours to a few days after they've taken the photos, although the general wish is for this time to shrink (to be more organized, to make more time for their blog, to spend less time at work, etc.). When looking back at their photos, photobloggers describe two different kinds of experience. In one, the image evokes some facet of the picture-taking moment: what the shot looked like in their mind's eye; the feeling of being just there, just then; their motivation for taking the photo, etc. In the other, the image provokes a new kind of response, a new experience (distinct from anything that happened when the image was taken). There is a desired surprise that many photobloggers talk about which happens when they look at their photographs after having made them, and which they therefore associate closely with the making of the blog. They say, as a way of explaining the occurrence and appeal of this desired surprise, that they do not have strict intentions for their photography. The fact that digital photographs are free of cost allows them to take pictures whenever they want, of whatever they want. They can relax their standards; they can shoot outside traditional photographic categories. And this proliferation of photographs and the situations in which photographs are made creates the conditions under which surprise is possible. The first kind of experience (memory) is motivated by photography; the second (surprise) by the photograph. Although, interestingly, both kinds of experience stab backwards, from the viewing of a photograph to the act of photography, collapsing not the time or distance that separates these activities, but the activities themselves.

Photobloggers often write captions for their photographs as a way, they say, of letting their audience know what they had in mind when they took the photo. Captions also simply describe what the photograph depicts, if this is not obvious. One photoblogger adds that she likes to write captions 'because you've got a person's comment there. It's not just a photo that exists on its own. It gives it some context, some human context. Rather than just being on its own. This has been selected by a person.'

Most photobloggers say something curious about how they select the photos that will appear on their blog (because no one I talked to posts all of their photographs; there is always a process of selection). They say: 'I don't know if a photograph will be good until I've taken it.' Their reply is about standards of evaluation, and, more precisely, about the importance of spontaneity in the process of selection and the doing of a photoblog generally.

Their interest in picturing ‘the mundane’ – the simple everyday moments of their lives, the otherwise unremarkable events – has led every photoblogger I know to carry their camera with them at all times, or to aspire to this. One photoblogger always carries his digital camera in a holster on his belt. Others carry cameras in their rucksacks and handbags. They hate to forget their camera – and despite due diligence, they’re always forgetting their cameras. And of course, something is bound to want photographing whenever the camera isn’t there. One photoblogger described to me an especially pleasing alignment of buildings seen at a very early hour of the morning, but which he had missed (in more than just a photographic sense, I think) because he had forgotten his camera. He would be obliged someday, he told me, to go back to that spot, and stay up until just that hour, possibly imbibing the same amount of alcohol, in order to recreate and capture that image he first saw. In his story, and his description of how the image will have to be re-staged, we begin to see the incorporative tendencies at work here: photoblog, photoblogger, photography; that particular hour, a particular state of mind, the look of the city. No element in the preceding lists leaves off neatly before another. They shuffle and entwine. So that the resulting photograph is both a thing and an experience; it exists alone, but also as an integrated part of one’s experiences of a day, or night. In the same way that one dreads missing a good experience, most photobloggers dread leaving their camera behind.

In talking with me, photobloggers tend to return the discussion of photoblogs to everyday experiences, as if in some sense this is really what we have been talking about, and not photography or photoblogging at all. When asked too many questions about the nature of their photography, about what they like and why they do what they do, many retreat into self-critique, or self-parody: ‘My photos are often of really boring stuff, just what I see.’ These responses appear to be entirely ingenuous (not falsely self-deprecating) in at least one sense: they are an honest reaction to being forced by the interviewer to think too much and *in the wrong way* about their own practices. This kind of response emphasizes the importance to photoblogging of *not* thinking too much, of the role that instinct plays in the making of photographs and the photoblog. In interviews with photobloggers, I often found myself pressing them up against the end of their desire or ability to profitably talk about what they do. This presents an interesting problem for my research, and an interesting opportunity at the level of analysis.

There are two broad themes that I now want to discuss, both related to desire: the first, a desire that reaches outward in order to draw in (‘Collapse’); the second, a desire that draws inward in order to extend out (‘Motivate’). The goal that each section shares is to demonstrate how the practice of photoblogging (for instance) resists what has been our common tendency to separate technology (e.g. the camera) and its apparent products

(e.g. the photograph), as if the former were merely a tool and the latter were the real thing, the analytical object, the source of the human.¹¹

Collapse

This excerpt from a conversation I had with one photoblogger, who I'll call Ed, raises some key characteristics of photoblogs, the act of photoblogging, and the theme of collapse.

K: You need a camera implanted in your eyes.

E: That's what I want: camera on the glasses, mobile phone around ear, bluetooth to a pack down here and computer [on waist], and heads-up display on glasses. So, completely wired but with none of these objects [gesturing at his L'espion digital camera, mobile phone, Handspring PDA plus portable keyboard, and mp3 player]. So I can go around recording, taking pictures by [pause] blinking, I don't know.

My suggestion that Ed implant cameras in his eyes is a joke that worked in the context of the interview – that is, in the interview, it wasn't quite the exaggeration or non sequitur that it seems to be here. It was my response to a desire I heard voiced in Ed's descriptions of his own photographic practice. Ed, like most photobloggers, endeavours to always take more photographs (than he did before; than he does now), and many of his purchases of new technology, as well as his new or reconceived uses for technology, are strategies for achieving this goal. For instance, he says he bought a L'espion camera because it was an affordable digital camera (£30), but its small size and tiny pleather holster allowed Ed to always carry a camera with him. He experienced these affordances of the camera as a solution: specifically, to the problem of never having a camera when he needed one; to the problem of not taking enough photos. He also takes walks around London to increase his chances of encountering photographs (to place himself in the way of potential photographs). He seemed intensely interested not just in the photography or the photographs themselves, but in the frequency with which he manages to take photographs, as if the proliferation of occasions and sites for photography was as much the goal as photography itself.

So, in the interview, my joke about Ed needing bionic eyes seemed to follow appropriately from the themes of the conversation. But Ed further normalized my comment by fully, unconditionally, unhesitatingly accepting it not only as a sensible suggestion, but also as a solution that he had already devised. While his imagined system is both technologically practicable and genuinely something that he'd like to have, it is articulated as a fantasy, and therefore can be read as a description of an obstacle and its removal. 'So I can go around recording, taking pictures by [pause]

blinking, I don't know.' Blinking, as a trigger, would significantly reduce the barriers that exist between seeing the image and fixing it photographically – barriers which, with a digital camera, include: retrieving the camera, turning it on, waiting for the camera to ready itself, lining up the shot, pressing the button, and then waiting for the camera to focus, process, and record. Earlier in the interview, Ed described walking through Westminster and seeing a bus with an interesting advertisement on its side, one that he wanted to photograph. The event was remarkable because the difficulty of removing the camera from his bag caused Ed to miss the shot. Blinking, as a trigger, would collapse the instant of first sight with photography itself, with the act of making the picture.

If, in our reading of this scene and the movements of bodies, technologies and practices therein, we privilege only the final image, then Ed's fantasy seems to have solved the problem of not having enough or the right kind of photographs. But this is not quite his problem. What Ed's fantasized blogging machine accomplishes is the collapse of certain barriers that separate existence – the living of life – from the making of photographs. Ed wants to live as he photographs; to photograph as he lives. Photography would become less independent of the act of going for a walk; the walk itself less resistant to the making of photographs. If we arrest the expected analytical movement from photography to photograph, what becomes visible is the new, categorical richness of the photographic moment – which, in Ed's fantasy, becomes inextricable from the richness of his life. His problem is the barrier that exists between the living of his life and the technologies for making photographs *within* and *throughout* that life. In a sense, he sees technology as his problem (i.e. its discreteness from life, from his body and from the biological ways his sight functions). Interestingly, his solution is a technological one: augment his body with the means to generate photographs as he lives; remove duration from the process of taking a photograph; remove the need to reach out and grasp a separate physical device in order to fix the image. Notice not just how Ed's desires begin to articulate an interestingly reconfigured photography, but how his technological fantasy is also a fantasy about his life. He wants to proliferate photography so that it becomes less distinct from his life in general. An infinite expansion of photography in this way would effect an infinite regression as well: being everywhere, photography would also be nowhere.

But the collapse Ed effects in his technological fantasy is more far-reaching still. What his blogging machine draws into the photographic moment is not just the final image but a unique medium for the publication and display of the image: the photoblog. Ed needs Bluetooth, a mobile phone and a computer pack because what he also wants to do is instantly blog the photos he captures – that is, instantly send them to the web and his own website, his blog.

I've spent so much time on this single fantasy because it is one that I think other photobloggers would understand, and one that tips us off to a significant theme in photoblogging. What Ed, and other photobloggers, have discovered is that the photoblog motivates the taking of more photos. The photoblog gives photos something to do. Ed says it this way:

So the site gives me a reason to do things that I enjoy doing, a reason to record things, a reason to take photos because I will publish them [on the blog]. I find this pile [of paper photographs] annoying, I get it back and look at it and 'Wow, that's a cool photo' [but, his shrug implies: what's the point, what can I do with it?].

The photoblog, as a technology paired with that of the digital camera, draws photographic acts, photographic images and the display of those images into closer conjunction. Ed's fantasy tells us how they relate: the photoblog, a technology that displays images and gives them purpose, is drawn into the act of taking photographs; and photography, through a related ligature, is conjoined with walking, movement through the city, Ed's life itself. The photoblog, the camera and the life of the photoblogger become, in a sense, a single technology – or a single human. And the emphasis here, the action, seems not to reside in the cultural *movement towards* inert, discrete images (in albums, on the web, in annoying stacks, or wherever), but in the reverse flow, the *reflux* of images, technologies, representations, representational strategies – the various pleasures we derive from photographs – *into* the complex space of the simple human act. Ed simply goes for a walk.

Motivate

But, of course, photobloggers think concretely about photographs as well. I asked, another London photoblogger, to shuffle through a stack of paper photographs and tell me which he would choose to put on his blog, and which he would discard. As he did this, his choices seemed not to be guided by a preconceived, systematic set of standards, but rather by a kind of practised automatism. He only paused once, and briefly, to consider an image that he found 'interesting', then quickly decided 'yes' and immediately carried on, as if the fact of the pause itself was ample justification for including the photo in the blog.

This theme of instinct, of acting against conscious intention, is persistent in conversations with photobloggers. They apply it to the act of making a photograph and to the selection of photographs for their blog. It's part of the reason why photoblogging is so hard to talk about in the language that theories of photography have set out for it. Photobloggers' resistance to intention seems meant to frustrate these very categories, the ones that the

history of photography has given for them to use, in language and in practice. It's also why Latour's (2002: 19, 251) work is both relevant and not enough. His notion of the detour names the way that our use of technology always frustrates the relationship of means to ends, despite our refusal to think of technology in anything other than instrumental terms. His notion resists the idea that technologies are ever mere tools; he designates them as actors in their own right. While it would be a good start, it's not enough to say that photobloggers' intentions are deflected by the technologies they use, or to say that photographic means never quite hook up cleanly to the photoblog's ends. Photobloggers actively confound the kinds of intentionality that are historically bound up with the practice of photography. This, I think, is why photobloggers often had thin patience for my questions about intention.

In part, photobloggers' practice of what we might call a minor intentionality explains something that many repeated: they don't know whether X will make an interesting photograph until they see the photograph itself. This practice – and I think it is a practice as much as it is, say, a standard of evaluation – leaves space for the Doing to be independent of that which is Done; the act to be separate from the object; photography to exist distinct from the photograph. Latour suggests that our attempts to make technology into a mere tool, a means to an end, is evidence that we deny, at least discursively, the ways that our use of technology is generative (promiscuous) more than it is instrumental (monogamous). But photobloggers seem to *want* to be deterred from their ostensible goals, seem to want suspense, to want an obstruction of the clear path – the paths along which well-meaning interviewers might be keen to herd them. Photobloggers appear to be not victims of the detour, but wielders of it.

There is a very basic, and explicitly stated, desire at work here. Photobloggers almost all state that they want, or have wanted to take more photographs, that they like having photographs as depictions of their experiences, but that in the past, this desire has often failed to produce the necessary action of making a lot of photographs. When we want something but fail to do it, this seems to be evidence that we don't so much want the thing as want to want it. In any case, there is some obstacle. Photoblogs are one answer to this paradox of motivation. One function of the photoblog, its practitioners say, is to provide motivation for taking photos. The photoblog provides structure for photographs, gives them something to do, compels their production via the motivating external abstractions of a project. This makes the photoblogger answerable not to her own (sometimes unreliable) self, but to her blog and its audiences, however hypothetical these are, however unknown.¹² She acquires a responsibility. But while imposing a structure in the form of, say, external deadlines or an expectant audience, often helps motivate work, it may excise pleasure from the doing

if this is done under the duress of something else's agency. How, then, to maintain the pleasure of doing *and* ensure that the doing will get done?

One might – and this would be a strange suggestion if it weren't, in fact, what photobloggers do – create a structure for the activity which divides the work into two temporalities. In one of which, the activity is simply done and experienced in the present tense, without thought of the future, or of what *is getting* accomplished through those actions, or of what *has been* accomplished, cumulatively, in the longer view. So, for example, Geraldine takes a photograph everyday, in the present, without much thought about what is getting built by this activity – without much conscious intention. Simple. She does it because she likes making photos. Or Frank: 'Because at the top level, for me, it was like "Oh, I know what I'll do, I'll take a picture everyday and stick it on my website", and that was kind of it.'

In the other temporality, the complement of the first, one has yet to do X completely, but creates a framework for action in which one experiences X (in the present) as though it had *already been done*. For example, Jenni creates a photoblog which both exists and is yet to exist in the moment of taking the photo; that is, the photo that she is making now isn't yet on the blog, but it is experienced as though it were already there. This is one of the important ways that the blog works. Photo-making is done with the blog partially in mind. Most bloggers have a sense of how they will post a photo as or before they make it. But the blog is not thought to be the singular outcome of the photo-making, which would become, thereby, merely a means, merely an instrumentality. Rather, the blog comes to exist within, and enrich, the moment of photography. It makes the picture-making more enjoyable. Almost all photobloggers describe this effect, the presence and role of the blog in their photo-making, the way it infects their actions without subsuming them. The blog exists in the moment of photography, but it is not *why* they take the photo.

My own desire here is to account for the unique way that a photoblog inhabits the act of making photographs, without flattening the singularity of either photoblogging or photography, and without normalizing, or straightening the relationship between them. This is how I want to describe it: the photoblog collapses the *activity of* photoblogging with the *activity of* photography without collapsing (1) the *space* that separates the making of photos and the blogging of them, or (2) the *time* that separates these activities (from a few hours to a few days, depending on one's backlog of photos), or (3) the desires and pleasures that energize both activities. Photography and blogging become interarticulated. They become mutually motivating. Motivation derives from the way the photoblog bifurcates one's sense of time. Among the productive faculties of the photoblog, there is the capacity to place alongside the present tense this special state of *having (already) done* something: having created a large collection of photographs from everyday life, having assembled a collection, a visual memory of

one's life and activities. The peculiarity of this past tense form, *having done*, is the key to apprehending the relationship between photoblogging, photography and photographs. To do its work, this strange tense requires a separation of the pleasures of photo-making and the pleasures of blogging, and a resistance to intentionality and meticulous planning. Or rather, these practices produce the tense of *having done*.

Photobloggers resist asking too many questions about their practice in order to preserve the sanctity of this especially productive tense. Forethought, intention, planning: these bring other tenses into the blind present, for example: How much have I done? how much might I do? Ed says: 'So the site [his photoblog] gives me a reason to do things that I enjoy doing, a reason to record things, a reason to take photos because I will publish them.' But he also says that he enjoys, in an unmediated sense, the act of taking photographs and the kind of vision this engenders in him, so he hardly seems to need an external motivator. Why does one need a reason to do things that one enjoys doing? Because while pleasure in the present tense ensures that one enjoys the activity while one does it, pleasure in the past perfect of doing (*having had done*) ensures that the pleasure of a task already done supplements one's motivation for doing in the present. And over time, consistent doing in the present produces the desired future; activities done day-to-day, experienced moment-to-moment, eventually accumulate in the form of a collection, a record, a photoblog. In this way, the photoblog is a thing that always will *have been* made. It exists in the present, but does not determine the actions taken in the present. Photoblogs, in this sense, are self-productive; they effect the impossible task of pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps. This is how they can be independent of the actions that generate them, and at the same time intricately related to them.

Conclusion

Throughout this research, I've tried to position photographs, photography and photoblogs in a complex relationship with one another, an attempt which shares certain patterns of analytical movement with theorists of photography who have tried to position photography in relation to the Real. In this effort, the confusions have mounted in the form of (what are ostensibly) paradoxes, tautologies, counter-intuitive flows and roundabout causalities. Photography produces photographs as effects, but isn't superseded by them and doesn't even seem to be the necessary cause of them. The photoblog motivates photography, but doesn't seem to be the reason people take photographs. Gill likes taking photographs of things because she likes taking photographs of things. She has an intention to be

unintentional. Seen from one angle, photography appears to be the means and the photoblog the ends. From another angle, the photoblog seems to be the means and photography the end.

Latour identifies technology as the instigator of these tidal movements. Photobloggers wouldn't necessarily agree. Implicit in their responses to some of my questions was a gentle admonishment: that I was looking for intentions where there might be none, asking questions where none could be asked. I take, therefore, photobloggers' response to Latour (2002: 252) to be this: just as 'technologies betray our most imperious desires [e.g. for our use of technology to produce clean, predictable results]', so desires betray our most imperious technologies. What Latour means is that we underestimate the complexity and nature of technology if we assume it to be a simple instrument of our will, a slave to our desires. What photobloggers seem to mean is that we underestimate desire if we assume it to be a simple instrument of our technologies. Just because we own a camera does not mean we take, or even like taking photographs. But most photobloggers *want* to take more photographs. The trick of technology is to make us think that we desire what it offers to produce, but also that *it* will produce what we desire, that we need simply purchase it. But photobloggers have noticed that technology needs something else – a supplement – to work, to motivate us. It needs desire. And desire is at least as tricky, as un-straight, as unpredictable and imperious as technology. In their work, Deleuze and Guattari try to recoup desire from our various attempts to manage it. They try to reclaim it as profligate and transgressive. They want to flaunt its uncanny productivity.

Photoblogs' productivity (from an analytical perspective) is in their capacity to join up disparate elements – elements which in the study of new media are routinely separated, as evidenced by their presumed need for connection via causality, intention, etc.¹³ Photoblogs incorporate, and are in turn incorporated by at least four significant entities: (1) the self of the photoblogger, (2) a potential audience for the self's activities, (3) those activities themselves (taking photos) and (4) the technologies that operate in and around these entities. Neither 'technology' nor 'new media', as categories, can account for a photoblog's strange affinities. In light of the photoblog's surprising promiscuity, what if we understand it to be both a technology and a desire, device and some invested part of its human user. What I mean is: the photoblog is both what photobloggers want (a record of their everyday lives and idiosyncratic vision) and the means for achieving it (that is, the desire to achieve it). Though grammatically awkward, this does strike me as a fair way to account for the strange, a-causal functionality of the photoblog. In this guise, the photoblog inserts itself non-temporally between photography and the photograph, so that while the photoblog succeeds the making of the

photograph in time, it seems to precede the making of the photograph motivationally. The photoblog, then, is what divides photography and the photograph into two separate spheres of activity (temporalities) and pleasurable engagement (desire).

In this position, unexpectedly, the photoblog comes to rest in the place that has been traditionally (theoretically) allotted to the Real. The Real stood, and often still stands, as the connection between the world to be pictured and some photographic tracing of the world; we could say that the Real has been thought to ontologically motivate the photograph. But for photobloggers, it is not the Real but the photoblog itself that motivates photography on one side (its doing) and the photograph on the other (its purpose). In union with photography, the photoblog functions as a verb: motivating, justifying. In union with photographs, the photoblog functions as a noun: collection, site.

The most common answer to my question about motivation – and the question, interestingly, that everyone seems to most want answered of photoblogging, namely ‘Why do you do this?’ – was something like ‘I’m not *exactly* sure.’ The popularity of this answer is evidence *not* of a lack of productive self-reflexivity in the photoblogger, nor really of a shortage of good answers, but of something objectionable in the question. That objectionable something seems to be this: the question ‘why do you blog’ assumes that the desire to do so is an exterior condition, that desire either precedes and produces the blog, or that the blog simply effects a desired outcome. It assumes that the photoblog is a means to an end, or the end of some means. But the photoblog hardly needs to be explained (away) by something else. Explanation is not its mode of external relation, not the way it links itself to other entities, other temporalities, other technologies, other forms of pleasure and motivation.

So what are the photoblog’s limits and desires – its possibilities – in the realm of theory and research? The question has insinuated itself time and again. Are these strange capacities of the photoblog – its admixtures of time, its propagation of desire, its tidal movements – unique to itself, or does the photoblog also serve as an aid to vision (like an X-ray), illustrating the fact that other new media objects also function this way?

Notes

I am grateful to Sapient and to the University of Surrey, most especially to Dr. Nina Wakeford, for their generous support of the research that led to this article.

1. Specifically, our desire for certain effects of representation: how we want pictures to affect us.

2. A sampling of recent literature on digital photography includes: Burgin (1996), Kember (1995, 1998, 2003), Manovich (2003), Mitchell (1992), Ritchin (1990a, 1990b, 1991), Rosler (1991), Slater (1992).

3. For example: planning to take photographs, conceiving a photograph or noticing an opportunity, capturing the shot, examining the results, saving, filing, posting to the web, etc.

4. On 6 January 2003, www.blogger.com reported to have over 1 million registered users. Blogger is the most popular DIY blog publishing site, but it is not the only way to create a blog. More coding-competent bloggers, or bloggers who desire a more tailored site, often use www.movabletype.org or <http://www.noahgrey.com/greyssoft/>. In total, the number of bloggers worldwide, including bloggers and photobloggers, is well over 1 million.

5. For example:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2621581.stm>

<http://www.technorati.com/cosmos/top100.html>

<http://archive.salon.com/tech/col/rose/2002/05/10/blogs/index1.html>

<http://archive.salon.com/tech/feature/2002/05/10/blogbrain/index1.html>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/2775249.stm>

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/sci_tech/2000/dot_life/1799998.stm

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/2783951.stm>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/weblog/special/0,10627,744914,00.html>

<http://www.photoblogs.org/>

<http://www.blo.gs/>

<http://www.timemachinego.com/ukblogs/>

6. Reed provides a far more detailed historical and evolutionary account of blogs: their emergence and their formal varieties. As my article largely ignores blogs per se, Reed's article is an important complement to mine.

7. For a measure of the increasing popularity of photoblogging, and a more first-hand sense of how they work, see www.photoblogs.org, which is a kind of meta-blog, a blog that references and organizes other photoblogs.

8. All of the interviewees live in the UK; most live in London. They range in age from early twenties to late forties, but most are in their late twenties. They tend, if they tend to be anything, to be relatively tech-savvy, and often, in fact, work in the technology industry. Many spend a lot of their time in front of a computer anyway, which facilitates frequent blogging. The method of sampling was, in a certain sense, blind, in that all participants were found on the internet, through their blogs, which are rarely specific about demographics (or at least not reliably so). In the beginning of the study, gender distribution was heavily weighted towards men; a systematic effort to talk to more women then equalled their numbers. Race and ethnicity, as factors, were not explicitly considered; not surprisingly, the participants tended to be white and British.

9. There is at least one important distinction in the blogging world (or 'the blogosphere', as bloggers sometimes cringingly refer to it) that I will be ignoring in this paper. www.blogger.com is one host for blogs; www.livejournal.com is another, and while both, in the most general sense, host blogs, there are significant differences between people who gravitate towards one or the other. The most often cited difference has to do with audience: livejournal users, who tend to call what they do a 'journal' rather than a 'blog', think of livejournal.com as a bounded community of users. And livejournal.com has design features which explicitly support this conception. Blogger.com users tend to imagine that they are publishing to the everyone and no one of the wider internet, or they create their own small audiences with little support from blogger.com. Livejournal.com is set up to be a

community and appears, in significant ways, to function as such for its users. Blogger.com, by and large, is not. While these differences are fascinating, they are the work of another study.

10. There are echoes of the psychoanalytic Real in this discussion. According to psychoanalytic thought, we fictionalize certain troubling facets of real life in order to accept them; these fictions mediate our experience of real life. Slavoj Žižek describes this return of the Real:

Usually we say that we should not mistake fiction for reality – remember the postmodern doxa according to which ‘reality’ is a discursive product, a symbolic fiction. . . . The lesson of psychoanalysis here is the opposite one: *we should not mistake reality for fiction* – we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the Real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it. (2002: 19)

11. In this goal and the embedded conceptualization of desire, I owe a clear debt to the work of Bruno Latour (1993, 2002) and Deleuze and Guattari (1985). Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the desiring machine redeems the productive capacity of desire, recognizes the potency of the mechanisms within us that produce desire, and tries to rescue desire from the forces that would sequester it (as, for example, the concept of sublimation does in psychoanalytic thought). Likewise, we can grasp Latour’s quasi-object; in contrast to the conventional objects of study, the quasi-object does not retreat behind the unimpeachable scientism of the natural or the impossible constructivism of the social. Both concepts recoup their objects and place them at our disposal. They resist the pervasive tendency to think in straight lines that recede; the tendency, for example, of visual theorists to discuss photography as if it were only approachable via the photographs it produces; the tendency of internet researchers to assume that online is online, that websites don’t spill over into, and draw actively on, and become inextricable from offline activities. The blog, sitting within the heterogeneity of its elements – the blog itself, photobloggers, cameras, computers, the city street that situates the banal events that want picturing and then blogging – shares an important goal with these concepts: to retrieve the object (of study, of action, of self-documentation), to make it available again for use, for agile deployment. We can understand the photoblog as the new media object that will not be relegated; we can understand the work of the photoblogger – in taking her photos, making her blog – as an effort to forge a practice that resists forces that want to recoup their work for the Real, for direct causality, for anything so straight (forces that include, as we’ll see, me and my questions). It is a fight that all new media objects face. The following sections describe some of the on-the-ground work of this struggle as it impacts photoblogs and photobloggers.

12. The question of audience is an interesting one, and one that I never quite adequately address. Most bloggers assume or know that their blog has some kind of audience. This is both the myth and reality of the internet: that someone is or always might be watching. If they install the right software, they can know *how many* people are watching, but unless people leave comments (and most blogs have some form of comment box), they cannot know *who* is watching. It is also fair to say that most bloggers *hope* that someone is watching, and are delighted to receive comments on their blog as evidence that this is, in fact, the case. Commenting on other people’s blogs is a common way to make both friends and enemies.

13. As psychoanalytic subjects are separated from their desires by sublimation, repression, etc.

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