Transient photographs

The methods and underpinning theories with which we have analysed or interpreted photographic images are no longer adequate for thinking

about networked digital photographs. The kind of visual, textual or semiotic analysis that has dominated the theory of photography (and art history and visual cultural studies more generally) assumes that its objects of study are rich and complex artifacts attended to by viewers who scrutinise them with concentrated interest. They are grounded in conceptions of photography and its reception that assume framed, fixed and stable images viewed (or 'read') by equally centred and motivated viewers.

It is now the case that the vast generality of photographic images enter fibre optic and telecommunication networks as numeric data and are transmitted, stored, and shared in this coded form. Invisible to human beings but readable by machines (computers), these images only rarely, if at all, take the form or 'output' of a stable physical print. The most common way of viewing such networked images is on the light emitting screens of cameras, camera-phones, PDAs of various kinds and laptop computers. These, of course, can be switched on and off, hence such images have duration; a quality new to photographs (Nardelli 2012: 159–78). Many such screens will be interactive and the images they display can be moved, resized and reformatted by a tap or stroke of a finger. We may say, then, that it is in the nature of digital networked images to exist in a number of states that are potential rather than actual in a fixed and physical kind of way. Such images are fugitive and transient, they come and they go, they may endure for only short periods of time and in different places, maybe many places simultaneously. Characteristically they exist in multiples; as strings, threads, sets, grids (see Frosh's thoughts on the 'thumbnail', this volume). We anticipate that behind an image we have alighted on there is another waiting or there is one, seen earlier, to be returned to. Rather than absorbing us in a singular manner each image seems to nudge us toward another. They have a kind of mobility as we scroll across them, clicking one or another in and out of the foreground of the screen's shallow space. We pay attention to such photographs in different, more fleeting or distracted ways than the kind of viewer that is imagined by traditional theories of photography, embodied now as the minority audiences of gallery-installed prints. (For

Photography, information and attention

This fugitive and transient networked photograph and its restless viewer (or user) is more than an aesthetic form. It is part of a larger reconfiguration of experience and mediation of the world by information technologies. We may see what is at stake here if we think about what is meant when we say that photographs have become information. This does not mean that there is a proliferation of images that carry information of the kind that we might once have taken a traditional documentary photograph to give us; as a report on a specific event, thing or situation. The different kind of information that photographs have become had been laying in wait for some time, at least since 1949 when a theory of information as the transmission of unambiguous signals in telecommunication systems was outlined in Shannon and Weaver's foundational 'A Mathematical Theory of Communication'.[3] By the early 1950s, such a theory began to be operational with regard to photographs as it became possible to scan and convert them into arrays of binary digits, and hence they became 'electronically processable digital information' (Mitchell 1992: 1) However, it was not until considerably later, in the early 2000s, that digital cameras supplied such 'processable' information automatically and fed it into the internet. The conversion of

The question has become, how does any particular enterprise, owner or provider of information, corporate or public, commercial or educational, scientific or artistic, gain attention to 'their' information? How is a supply or measure of the scarce commodity that is human attention to be obtained? In the twentieth century the obvious site of this competition for attention was advertising and the selling of 'eyeballs' by commercial television channels. The predominant forms of twentieth-century 'mass media', the printed press (in which photography was paramount) and television, continue to battle for ratings and sales but the real ground has moved to networked digital media with its interactive push-pull strategies, niche markets, pop-ups, cookies and predictive operations. This is a complex issue, politically, within which photography continues to be centrally involved. Suffice it to say that what is at stake is a competition for the human capacity for paying attention; a commodification of our cognitive capacities (for a comprehensive discussion, see 'Paying Attention', the special issue of *Culture Machine* Vol 13, 2012 at www.culturemachine.net/index.php/-cm).