

Photographs Objects Histories



On the Materiality of Images

Edited by Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart

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PHOTOGRAPHS OBJECTS HISTORIES

This innovative volume explores the idea that while photographs are images, they are also objects, and this materiality is integral to their meaning and use. It explores the different institutional, political, religious and domestic spheres in which photographs exist through a diverse range of international case studies—from the Netherlands, North America and Australia to Japan, Romania and Tibet. All show that physical properties, the nature of use and the cultural formations in which the photographs function make their ‘objectness’ central to how we can understand them in new ways.

The contributors come from disciplines including history of photography, visual anthropology and art history, and they have all developed original methodological strategies to engage with the materiality of photographic images. Inspiring and instructive, the book can be used both as a much-needed survey of this exciting new area of investigation and as a handbook for the student or academic on how to understand photographs as objects in diverse contexts.

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It is surprising how few people have thought about photographs as a form of material culture and were prepared to pick up the gauntlet and think differently about photographs. So finally we should like to thank our contributors who have risen to the challenge and stuck by us loyally throughout—it is they who make the volume.

1

INTRODUCTION

Photographs as objects

Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart

The photograph was very old, the corners were blunted from having been pasted in an album, the sepia print had faded, and the picture just managed to show two children standing together at the end of a little wooden bridge in a glassed-in conservatory, what was called a Winter Garden in those days.

(Barthes 1984:67)

In one of the most famous and influential descriptions in the whole literature of photography, what Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* describes first is not the image of the two children but a material object. It is a photograph that carries on it the marks of its own history, of its chemical deterioration ('the sepia print had faded'), and the fact that it once belonged to a broader visual narrative, pasted in an album, the pages of which were, we can conjecture, repeatedly handled as they were turned, re-enacting its narrative in many different contexts.

The central rationale of *Photographs Objects Histories* is that a photograph is a three-dimensional thing, not only a two-dimensional image. As such, photographs exist materially in the world, as chemical deposits on paper, as images mounted on a multitude of different sized, shaped, coloured and decorated cards, as subject to additions to their surface or as drawing their meanings from presentational forms such as frames and albums. Photographs are both images *and* physical objects that exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience. They have 'volume, opacity, tactility and a physical presence in the world' (Batchen 1997:2) and are thus enmeshed with subjective, embodied and sensuous interactions. These characteristics cannot be reduced to an abstract status as a commodity, nor to a set of meanings or ideologies that take the image as their pretext. Instead, they occupy spaces, move into different spaces, following lines of passage and usage that project them through the world (Straw 1998:2). As all the chapters here demonstrate in their different ways, thinking materially about photography encompasses processes of intention, making, distributing, consuming, using, discarding and recycling (Attfield 2000:3), all of which impact on the way in which photographs as images are understood.

For many decades writing on photography has resonated with references to the photograph as object. These references have made tantalizing and fleeting appearances, never to be pursued fully or systematically (a point to which we shall return). Frequently

photography's materiality is engaged with only in relation to the coinnosseurial 'fine print' on the one hand and conservation concerns on the other. Despite the clear realisation of this physical presence, the way in which material and presentational forms of photographs project the image into the viewer's space is overlooked in many analyses.

¹ The transparency of the medium is such that 'in order to see what the photograph is "of" we must first suppress our consciousness of what the photograph "is" in material terms' (Batchen 1997:2). The prevailing tendency is that photographs are apprehended in one visual act, absorbing image and object together, yet privileging the former. Photographs thus become detached from their physical properties and consequently from the functional context of a materiality that is glossed merely as a neutral support for images. As Maynard (1997:24) has argued, 'Perhaps what has ... most obdurately stood in the way of our understanding of photography is the assumption that photography is essentially a depictive device and that its other uses are marginal.'

Image content is, of course, fundamental to all the photographs that are discussed in this book. There are several reasons why this is so. Image content is our familiar way of thinking about photographs at the simplest level. Image content is usually why photographs were purchased, collected, exchanged or given as gifts in the first place, for the indexical appeal (that brief moment of exposure of the real world in front of the camera) is one of the photograph's defining qualities. However, the chapters in this volume also argue that there is a need to break, conceptually, the dominance of image content and look at the physical attributes of the photograph that influence content in the arrangement and projection of visual information. Consequently, while the chapters cannot hope to address all the multitude of material forms and performances with which photographic images are entangled, they none the less seek to redress this balance and, as a heuristic device, privilege the materiality of photographs whether in albums, in the museum gallery or in people's daily lives. This is intended not to attempt the impossible—to divorce the materiality of the photographic image from the image itself—but rather to consider in what ways the material influences contain or perform the image itself. Just as Barthes argues that the image and referent are laminated together, two leaves that cannot be separated (landscape and the window pane for instance) (Barthes 1984:6), photographs have inextricably linked meanings as images and meanings as objects; an indissoluble, yet ambiguous, melding of image and form, both of which are direct products of intention.

While all the chapters discuss images, the arguments are critically focused on the role of the material in understanding those images. In shifting the methodological focus away from 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. It can also be observed that these material forms exist in dialogue with the image itself to create the associative values placed on them.

Materiality translates the abstract and representational 'photography' into 'photographs' as objects that exist in time and space. The possibility of thinking about photographs in this way in part rests on the elemental fact that they are things: 'they are made, used, kept, and stored for specific reasons which do not necessarily co-incide... they can be transported, relocated, dispersed or damaged, torn and cropped and because

viewing implies one or several physical interactions' (Porto 2001:38). These material characteristics have a profound impact on the way images are 'read', as different material forms both signal and determine different expectations and use patterns. For instance, as Sassoon argues in Chapter 12, the experience of looking at a historical image on a computer screen is profoundly different in the understandings it might generate from the experience of, say, looking at the same image as an albumen print pasted in an album or a modern copy print in an archive file, for the 'grammar' of both images and things is complex and shifting. Consequently, throughout the volume is the cohering idea that experience of the image component alone is not to be confounded with the experience of the meaningful object (Gaskell 2000:176), just as experience of the material cannot be confounded with or reduced to experience of the image.

Why materiality matters

The chapters draw their methodologies from art history, the history of photography, social and cultural history, museology and anthropology. While the arguments here could have taken a number of theoretical turns—for instance, in a phenomenological direction—the aim of this volume is to keep theory close to the ground and consider the materiality of specific *kinds* of object/image relationship, rather than develop a theorised vision that might simply reproduce an abstract photographic discourse. This close up viewpoint allows us to grasp what might elude the broader perspective and demonstrates ways in which detailed empirical studies can advance theoretical understandings (Ginzburg 1993:26–7). Materiality can be said here to have a positivistic character, in that it is concerned with real physical objects in a world that is physically apprehendable not only through vision but through embodied relations of smell, taste, touch and hearing. However, as the chapters demonstrate, we are dealing not with a reductive fetishism, but with a complex and fluid relationship between people, images and things.

The materiality of photographs takes two broad and interrelated forms. First, it is the plasticity of the image itself, its chemistry, the paper it is printed on, the toning, the resulting surface variations. Such technical and physical choices in making photographs are seldom random. For instance, as Schwartz (1995:58) has argued, 'the choice of ambrotype over paper print implies a desire for uniqueness, the use of platinum over silver gelatin intimates an awareness of status, the use of gold toning a desire for permanence'. Second are the presentational forms, such as *cartes de visite*, cabinet cards, albums, mounts and frames, with which photographs are inseparably enmeshed and which have constituted a major consumer market since the nineteenth century, especially after the Kodak revolution of the late 1880s (Slater 1995:129). Both these forms of materiality carry another key element, the physical traces of usage and time.

A formative methodological influence has been the 'material turn' in anthropology, and indeed cultural studies, which in recent years has increasingly stressed the centrality and complexity of social meaning in relation to objects and the sociability of objects. Simultaneously there are methodologies emerging from what might be termed the 'social turn' that has dominated art history for the past couple of decades, itself inflected through a range of theoretical positions that have emerged from history, philosophy and critical

theory. These approaches concentrated on the mundane social existence of objects rather than on a fetishised object-other (Miller 1998:3, 5, 10).

In anthropology, Miller, drawing on Langer's work on discursive and presentational forms, has argued for discussions of artefacts to be explicitly separated from linguistic models, which he sees as too clumsy and restrictive. Instead, material culture analysis, proceeding from an anthropological position of direct observation, allows us to question ingrained assumptions concerning the superiority of language over other forms of expression, such as visual/material forms, and constitutes objects as important bridges between mental and physical worlds (Miller 1987:96–9). Recent developments in visual anthropology, as identified by Banks and Morphy (1997:14), also point in this direction, arguing that there is a shared methodology and theoretical framework between the visual, its analysis and material culture, all being concerned with material forms and social action, a position echoed by art historians such as Baxandall (1988), Holly (1996) and Gaskell (2000).

Although contemporary arts practice is beyond the scope of this volume, it none the less is an influence as part of this 'material turn', as exemplified in the work of artists such as Christian Boltanski, Joachim Schmid and Mohini Chandra, which has engaged with the material nature of photographs. Cindy Sherman too has, in a piece entitled *Madame de Pompadour*, used the material form as critical to her photo-constructions. As part of the wider concern for materiality it should at least be noted here, for it belongs to the wider discourse that changed the landscape of thinking about the depiction of the object and about art as object. Moreover, there is now a theoretical base for practice of this kind, which highlights the importance of concepts such as sentience and point of view.

Objects, including photographs, are therefore not just stage settings for human actions and meanings, but integral to them. Indeed, Gell (1998) has argued that objects themselves can be seen as social actors, in that it is not the meanings of things *per se* that are important but their social effects as they construct and influence the field of social action in ways that would not have occurred if they did not exist, or, in the case of photographs, if they did not exist in this or that specific format. This is especially evident in Chalfen and Murui's chapter on the *purikura* photographic prints in Japan (Chapter 11), the small size of which made them so collectable and created social groups around this particular image form.

Materiality is closely related to social biography. This view, which has emerged from the material turn in anthropology over recent years, argues that an object cannot be fully understood at any single point in its existence but should be understood as belonging in a continuing process of production, exchange, usage and meaning. As such, objects are enmeshed in, and active in, social relations, not merely passive entities in these processes (for example, Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987, 1998; Gosden and Marshall 1999; Edwards 2001).

This methodological approach provides a recurring theme in *Photographs Objects Histories* as the authors explore the trajectory of a photograph, or groups of photographs, and reveal histories often marked by dramatic changes of ownership, physical location or material changes that testify to the way in which complex patterns of values and relationships ascribed to photographs are momentarily fixed only to change again. In

some cases, photographs have led predominantly institutional lives (such as those discussed in Chapter 4), entering an institution shortly after their production. In other cases, photographs were personal or domestic objects from their inception but have subsequently been invested with very different values, as Willumson's chapter on the making of the art object suggests. In many cases, once-active signifiers of meaning are now dormant and obscure or radically altered. It is the traces of these former material lives that cling to photographs that provide the focus for *Photographs Objects Histories*, for they are vital clues for understanding the historical potency of the image. Many of these material trajectories intersect with discourses of knowledge and power, such as museum classification systems or the entanglements of photographs in the micro-politics of colonialism.

Resonating throughout these essays are two forms of social biography, relating to the forms of materiality we have just outlined. First, as is explored in Porto's chapter, is the social biography of image content, such as different prints, publication formats, lantern slides and so forth, all of which involve changes of material form. Second is the social biography of a specific photographic object, which may or may not be physically modified as it moves through space and time, as is demonstrated in Schwartz's chapter on the intended gift of a daguerreotype. Some of these biographies are institutionally imposed, as the practices of museums or galleries create specific forms of material object to accord with their specific economies of truth, as demonstrated in our chapter 'Mixed box' and in Willumson's discussion of the way in which histories of photography suppressed certain forms of materiality while privileging others.

The model is strongly linked to that of visual economy as developed by Deborah Poole (1997). This model moves the analysis beyond 'representations' to focus instead on the image's 'exchange values'. This extends John Tagg's model of 'visual currency', in which 'items produced by a certain elaborate mode of production...[were] distributed, circulated and consumed within a given set of social relations: pieces of paper [that is, material objects] that change hands, found use, a meaning and a value in certain social rituals' (Tagg 1988:164). While clearly representational content is a key element in this model, material forms and their use value have, argues Poole, equal weight as integral to the way in which groups of images were exchanged, accumulated and thus given social value, the power of the image being related to their status as accumulated objects (Poole 1997:11–12). Willumson's chapter, for example, demonstrates how the shift in categories of photographs as material objects from commodity form to the inalienable object of the art gallery constitutes a radical shift in the understanding of the photographs through their performance as material objects in very different spaces.

Throughout the history of photography, of course, the visual properties of the surface of the image have depended on the material—for instance, the daguerreotype could be viewed only through physical manipulation in the hand to establish the correct viewing angle (see Schwartz, Chapter 2 in this volume). These material forms have exceeded a direct indexical visual use, and created, literally and metaphorically, another dimension to the image. The arrival of a succession of new photographic techniques, formats and material forms demanded different poses and different spatial arrangements, both compositionally within the frame ² and, importantly, in the act of viewing the material object. This latter is another key methodological consideration that resonates through

many of the chapters. The eye as a bodily organ functions within a larger somatic context. This implies specific relations with an embodied viewer, which in turn determines responses to photographs. Material forms create very different embodied experiences of images and very different affective tones or theatres of consumption. For instance, framing devices distinguish relations between photographic space and the viewer's space, sometimes like the photographic frame accentuating the space, with other forms, like a stereographic card in a viewer, eliding the relations.

Thus choices matter. Choices are affective decisions that construct and respond to the significances and consequences of things and the human relations with which they are associated. They are made in relation to certain objectives and represent not the objectives themselves but the means to an end (Douglas and Isherwood 1978:71), namely a specifically articulated use and function of the photographic image. In this context Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' is useful, for it allows individual discretionary action within a structured set of dynamic dispositions (Bourdieu 1977:81). It is, Miller argues, often when objects are assumed to be trivial and not to matter that they are most powerful and effective as social forces. However, it is only in relation to materiality that we can address the actual contexts in which objects are made to mean. Through dwelling upon the more mundane sensual and material qualities of the object, we are able to unpack the more subtle connotations with cultural lives and values that are objectified through these forms, in part because of the qualities they possess' (Miller 1998:9–12). For these reasons, we are concerned with photographs that operate within everyday life and, as Michel de Certeau has argued in relation to other kinds of objects, draw their cultural currency from such placement (de Certeau 1984). Even the most pragmatically engendered materialities, such as photograph frames and albums, come to have meaning through the habitual reiterations of engagement with them (Pelligram 1998:109). While such choices, however, cannot be reduced to a single purposeful expression, they are redolent with latent and incidental meanings, forming bridges between mental and physical worlds, conscious and unconscious (Miller 1987:99). Objects contribute to the construction of a culturally constituted world because 'they are a vital visible record of cultural meaning that is otherwise intangible' (McCracken 1988:74).

The precursors of materiality

If, as we have argued, materiality is crucial to the understanding of photographs, it is instructive to consider the way in which it has previously been addressed, or in many cases not addressed. Writing about photography has concentrated almost exclusively on establishing an artistic canon with a chronological pantheon, on technical advances or, in more recent analytical approaches, the social and ideological construction of the image. This tradition is perhaps unsurprising given that, as Ian Jeffrey points out, until recently photographic historians were often collectors or curators intent on establishing a canon of prime works and, as a consequence, they adopted premises and methods from fine art and connoisseurship (Jeffrey 1986). Yet as Willumson argues in Chapter 5 in this volume, this practice is premised on an aesthetic appreciation of the material, such as the chemically controlled tonal balance, similar to different states and thus monetary values

of an artist's metal plate engraving, for example. Throughout there has been a reworking of the 'window on the world' approach to thinking about photography. While the cultural construction of that window is now fully recognised, the concern with the indexical has nevertheless dominated writing on photographs. It is an approach that privileges the idea that somehow photographs maintain a level of material transparency and what is important about them is the image content alone. Such an approach militates against the idea that photographs are solid physical objects.

Another model focuses on explanatory or causal history, at least as it is practised within the history of photography, and has tended to focus on origination, instigation and ostensible purpose. In this view one might include the broader analytical views of photography as abstract discourse, related to the analysis of the instrumentality of photographs in state or imperial control (for example, Tagg 1988; Lalvani 1996; Ryan 1997). Indeed, the postmodern angst that saturated many academic disciplines encouraged the examination of the epistemological bases from which images were made, and this was preferred over other ways of thinking about photographs.³ Explanatory or causal photography history has of late become extended, drawing from social history or anthropology. In this form such an approach has expanded the factual base of what we know about photography and offered insights into a range of concerns that deepen understanding, such as the use of visual tropes, or the context provided by a specific cultural milieu or commercial market. Such insights help to explain why photographs look the way they do. However, once again, except for those photographic historians who have specifically interested themselves in issues of presentation such as mounting, framing and exhibition display, or such concerns as the circulation of photographs in the networks of collecting and exhibiting (for instance, Poole 1997; Jaworek 1998; Edwards 2001), the explanatory or causal approach has again generally ignored photography's materiality.

Beaumont Newhall's magisterial *The History of Photography* (1949) provided an extensively illustrated, almost seamless narrative of the photographic pioneers, technologies and aesthetic considerations in which the photograph as an object, in the sense in which we are considering it here, is missing. Newhall's emphasis on establishing a factual base and aesthetic canon for the history of photography was an objective also pursued by Helmut and Alison Gernsheim (1969, 1988). Newhall's *History* was written while he was employed by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and it is significant how many of the overview histories were concerned with the context of an art institution or the world of collecting and connoisseurship (see Willumson, Chapter 5 in this volume). Lemagny's *History of Photography* (1987) is cast in a similar vein but offered considerably more of a social perspective than Newhall's. Even so, Lemagny did not extend this approach to what might now be termed 'the social biography of photographs'. Some of Newhall's later writing does, however, demonstrate his awareness that during the first year of the public announcement of photography, some of the leading proponents could not but be conscious of photography's own materiality (Newhall 1980).

The history of art contains a number of useful models or methodological seeds that prefigure the arguments in *Photographs Objects Histories*. Historical materialism, deriving ultimately from Marx and developed by Lukács and others (see, for example, Marx 1970; Lukács 1971; Althusser 1976), manifested itself in writing about art that

emphasised contexts and conditions of production⁴ over more traditional art historical concerns such as iconography. The materialist approach was exemplified by Janet Wolff in *The Social Production of Art* (1981), which argues that visual representation of any kind is never separate from its cultural formation, and indeed helps to shape it. In a different vein, Michael Baxandall's groundbreaking *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (1988) moved beyond issues of process and patronage to enquire into the circulation of ideas and cultural practices in which painting was an integral rather than a separate part. Although differently positioned, in many ways this echoes Pierre Bourdieu's exploration of the social meaning and practice of photography (1990). The philosophy of art also offers some useful pointers. Henri Focillon, in *The Life of Forms in Art* (1984), provides a rich source of ideas about the mutability of objects within cultural formations, drawing on Arsène Darmsteter's (1886) *The Life of Words*. The philosophy of art has also created a number of blind alleys for a material approach to photography. These include Roger Scruton's idea that a photograph is a surrogate for its image content. Interesting as the potential for this idea is, Scruton's theory only explored at an abstract level and did not engage with how people use photographs as surrogates. Philosophy, particularly the writing of Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1989a, b), offers a number of conceptual tools for realising an approach to history and to the study of objects and can be said to have bearing on the models of 'social biography' and 'visual economy'. The first of these concerns origination and the complex question of when something can be said to come into being and have a history made up of a multilayered matrix of interconnected traces.

Conversely, technical history might seem the obvious place to look for an engagement with photography's materiality and in certain respects this is so. Technical history engages with the very physical fabric of photography, such as surface and substrata. It deals with acts of becoming and with agents of change as physics and chemistry interact. However, except for those studies that are concerned with conservation issues such as image fading or decomposition, the marked tendency within technical history has been for the historical engagement to cease once the technical process under consideration is complete. Technology is seen as an end in itself rather than the producer of social salient objects. In addition, although some historians have indeed considered factors such as how various technical originators or the specialist responded to the physicality of photographs and what this says about how photography developed conceptually (for instance, Batchen 1997; Jaworek 1998), most have not explored the potential of using primary source material in this way.

From the 1970s texts began to appear with increasing regularity that located photography within a matrix of production and reception that foregrounded theories of gender and representation. This matrix drew from feminist discourse and especially feminist Marxism and eventually gave rise to theories that differentiated themselves from more mainstream feminist studies, such as queer theory. Likewise, the work of feminist critics of photographs such as Jo Spence (Holland and Spence 1991) and Annette Kuhn (1995) focused on family albums as constructed narratives. While the material is implied throughout this work, it is never fully articulated as an analytical category, but none the less is an important precursor of the material turn. An important metaphor that arose out of this intellectual endeavour is 'public/private', because it was seen to have a direct

bearing on the experiences of the gendered body and its representation. The importance of this for an argument grounded in the materiality of photography is that a text such as Jane Brettle and Sally Rice's *Public Bodies: Private States* (1994) positions photography as never separable from its relations with the world. This recognition of the reflexivity of photography is a significant development. However, the line of argument that flowed from this recognition tended in the direction of questioning the moment of photographic truth, the impossibility of defining what is real and an acknowledgement that our outwardly shared experiences are not as much lived as imaged. Although this writing on representation did bring insights into the possibility that photographs move through space and time, it largely buried these and did not initiate a thorough ongoing investigation into the lives that photographs lead after their initial point of inception. However, writing on representation, because it privileged the body and the embodied eye, did pave the way for an approach to photography that acknowledges that it offers a diverse range of body-related engagements.

This concern with embodied relationships with images forms an especially relevant category of writing about photography for a study of materiality. An example of this occurs when Hervé Guibert recalls kissing a photograph of the actor Terence Stamp, in *Ghost Image* (1996). Guibert also remembered acquired film stills, which, when he came to write about them, had been consigned to the bottom of a box, but he described them as bearing the traces of being repeatedly tacked to the canvas that covered his wall, then glued, then unglued from his door. That a photograph was seen to have presence (unlike film, which has to go through the transformation of being screened to acquire presence) took writing about photography in a direction that again resonates here.

A further prescient moment that acknowledges the haptic is located at the border between film studies and photographic theory. Régis Durand's 1995 essay 'How to see (photographically)' specifically identifies a photograph as an object. For Durand a photograph is an object that 'lacks all certainty' because it seems to call for so many different acts of looking, durations of engagement and types of attention depending on whether it is a snapshot in a wallet, a print in a portfolio, reproduced on the printed page or (to bring Durand's thinking forward in time) via a computer screen. But this is not all that theorizing about the ontology of photography and how photography differs ontologically from any other visual medium has to offer those in search of the vanguard of thinkers who recognised that photographs are objects as well as images. The philosopher Alois Riegl's idea of the 'optical-haptic' was taken up by Durand and others to explore the notion that when we look at photographs we often move from pure opticality to the optical-tactile as our attention moves from a thing being represented to an awareness of the texture of that thing (for example, the grain of skin or the weave of foliage), until a point is reached where we identify this with the very texture of the photograph itself.

Walter Benjamin's influential idea that the 'aura' possessed by an original, unique artwork was destroyed by 'mechanical reproduction' cast photography into the role of perpetrator in this process, a position that has resonated through writing on photography from Malraux's (1949) 'Museum without walls' to work such as Baudrillard's (1994) on simulacra. Politically, Benjamin took the view that mechanical reproduction had the beneficial effect of democratising art. However, he did not describe in any detail how this

might work and he also avoided the question of whether photography might itself possess auratic properties, a question taken up by Gabriel Hanganu in this volume (Chapter 10). Indeed, it could be argued that the premise of this volume precisely reinvests photographs of all sorts with their own 'aura' of thingness existing in the world.

If Benjamin saw materiality at work in instances such as an altarpiece still *in situ* in the chancel of a church and not in a photograph, for Susan Sontag materiality is a recurring theme in her writing on photography. In *On Photography* (1979) her placement of photography within a context of lived experiences—for example, tourists from highly developed work-orientated countries who are described as taking photographs as work displacement activity—enabled Sontag to develop an analysis that was not based on image content alone. In her recent essays on photography published in *Where the Stress Falls* (2002:218), Sontag considers the varied 'extramural life' that a photograph might lead outside the confines of the museum, and cites an example of images that began as prints taking on new identities when reproduced as postcards.

It will be clear then from these examples from a diverse literature that the materiality of photographs has always had a subliminal presence in writing about photographs. Such a knowledge simply strengthens a heuristic resolve to cohere these ideas and bring to the surface the physicality of photographs.

The ubiquitous materiality of photographs

It is impossible for one volume comprising eleven essays to address all the material forms of and interventions with the photographic image, all the presentational forms and social biographies that have mediated photographs and placed them in specific social and cultural discourses. Nor has it been possible to do more than indicate the vast array of culturally specific perceptions of the objecthood of photographs. Our aim is to represent as wide a spread as possible across historical periods and cultural boundaries, with the knowledge that some important material forms and cultural practices are inevitably left out. However, in partial compensation, this section of the introduction provides a reflection on the larger domain of photographic materiality, but one which, in different ways, relates back to the subjects discussed in this book. It is also a reflection of the state of knowledge, for, as we have suggested, there has been remarkably little work that concentrates analytically on the physicality of photographs. Discussions of *cartes de visite*—for instance, by scholars such as McCauley (1985), Poole (1997) or Hamilton and Hargreaves (2001)—have engaged with the material aspects of their subjects, as have writers on albums, especially the elaborate and gendered productions of nineteenth-century women—for instance, Smith (1998) and Crombie (1998), who have addressed the material as part of wider concerns. Conversely, some writing on presentational forms has considered them not as intrinsically interesting as material culture but as a means to compiling and extending an inventory of the images they contain or support, (for instance, Reinhart and Reinhart 1969; Welling 1976; Wood 1989; Henisch and Henisch 1994). Work by Wolfgang Jaworek (1998) on the reception of presentational forms in the nineteenth century promises to extend this given of investigation into an analytical realm.

Some forms of materiality emerge from specific performative desires for the image.

Photographs, as we have suggested, are made for a reason for a specific audience, to embody specific messages and moral values (Schwartz 1995:42; Attfield 2000:12). While this applies equally to image content, it is, we argue, essential to see material forms in the same way. For instance, to print in platinum, which is one of the most stable and permanent of photographic processes, as opposed to the volatility and inherently unstable chemistry of silver-based prints, speaks to a desire for permanence. The insistence of the National Photographic Record Association under Sir Benjamin Stone in 1897 that all prints were to be in platinum echoes Cosmo Burton, writing in the *British Journal of Photography* in 1889 that photographs for posterity should be ‘unpolluted by silver’ (Burton 1889:668).

Presentational forms equally reflect specific intent in the use and value of the photographs they embed, to the extent that the objects that embed photographs are in many cases meaningless without their photographs; for instance, empty frames or albums. These objects are only invigorated when they are again in conjunction with the images with which they have a symbiotic relationship, for display functions not only make the thing itself visible but make it more visible in certain ways (Maynard 1997:31–2). This form of materiality, in which image content and presentational form work together, is often dictated by the social uses of the photographs. They ‘serve to illuminate the distinctive texture of social relations in which it {the photograph} is performing its work’ (Banks 2001:51)—for instance, wedding photographs in white albums with silver bells printed on the cover, or photographs printed on enamel to withstand the weather in Italian country graveyards. In many ways one can see this as materiality embedding photographs into culturally specific expected or appropriate forms.

Albums in particular have performative qualities. Not only do they narrativise photographs, such as in family or travel albums (see Holland and Spence 1991; Hirsch 1997; Langford 2001; Willumson, Chapter 5, and Nordström, Chapter 6, this volume), but their materiality dictates the embodied conditions of viewing, literally performing the images in certain ways. How are albums used? Are they intended to be read formally? In a large group? Privately? Albums have weight, tactility, they often smell, often of damp, rotting card—the scent of ‘the past’ (Langford 2001:5). Large presentation albums require displaying on a table, their contents laid out and presented to the viewer. Such albums, viewed by two or more seated persons with the object spread across their knees, would link the group to one another physically, determining the social relations of viewing. Conversely, small albums, held in the hand, suggest a private relationship with the object: to view jointly with another person would again require very specific and close physical proximity (Edwards 1999:228–30).

Many presentational forms have a skewomorphic quality referring to other objects with precise social meanings and functions. Albums are made to look like precious books, religious books, such as Victorian albums with heavy embossed covers with gold tooling and gold edged pages that are closed with metal clasps, clearly a reference to medieval devotional books, the *carte de visite* album becoming a form of secular Bible (McCauley 1985:48). The format was appropriate to an object that was often kept as a book, perhaps, in wealthier households, actually in a library. Modern albums are made to look like leather-bound books, and even the flip case of a plastic wallet has material reference of this kind. Photographs are also produced as commemorative china, mugs and plates, in

the tradition of material object that goes back into the Renaissance period and is carried on by high street chemists to this day.⁵

Sometimes material forms reflect the content of the images through reference to other kinds of objects. In this they extend the sense of vision and the indexicality of the photograph itself in a mutually reinforcing sign system. For instance, many colonial albums and their decoration literally set the scene for the photographs and delineate the space in which the reading of the photographs might operate. An album from the Dutch East Indies, dating from about 1890–1900, has wooden cover boards and a half-leather binding that is shaped and painted in imitation of local rice barn decoration.⁶ Likewise, an album purchased in the early twentieth century from Farsari of Yokohama, Japan, has lacquered boards, inlaid with mother of pearl, the whole album being kept in a padded printed cotton box, and closed with traditional Japanese silk and bone toggles (Odo 1997). Other such albums use local craft styles and materials such as ikat, elaborately carved wood or metalwork, underlining the ‘exotic’ discourses that embed the images and reinforcing their reading (Edwards 2001:72). At a less elaborate level the thousands of small Kodak albums sold in the early twentieth century, embossed with flowers and the legend ‘Sunny Memories’, work in the same reinforcing way.

Often material forms reflect public and private functions of images. What is displayed, formally framed in the semi-public spaces of the home, and what is hidden away in boxes, locket, wallets or family Bibles? This applies equally to the display of photographs. There are profound cultural differences and cultural significances in what is displayed, in what contexts, who has access to it, how long it stays there, when it is superseded and so forth, as Jo Spence, for instance, has suggested in her writing on family albums (Holland and Spence 1991). Morley (1992) has commented on the use of the television as a space on which to display family photographs, the majority of which are formal or studio photographs marking weddings, graduations and the like, often in relation with other auratic objects such as souvenirs and gifts. For instance, silver and leather or ‘antique style’ frames holding photographs of *rites de passages*, graduations or weddings become public statements of identity and group cohesion, as discussed, for instance, by Gisèle Freund (1980) and Pierre Bourdieu (1990:31–9). The choice of frame itself may or may not be significant, and sometimes it is selected simply because it fits the photograph, yet the display and the space it occupies remain a significant material presentation of the photographs as social objects, (Banks 2001:54–5). Conversely, the informal unframed groupings such as displays on kitchen pin-boards or of ‘fridge magnets’ might be seen as displays of current and shifting identities within the group (Slater 1995:139). In their material provisionality they are concerned with self-presentation in the present, rather than the future that is suggested in the framing structures of an album or frame, for instance. Photographs are embedded in the flow of the everyday of a consumerist present rather than the non-ordinary. They are objects in a historically marked time.

Materiality is also capable of cutting across these categories. Marks on the photographic object point to the history of its presentational forms and engagements with them, such as is articulated by Barthes’s description quoted at the beginning of this chapter. For photographs also bear the scars of their use, as the Hervé Guibert example discussed above showed. Handling damage, the torn and creased corners, fold marks,

perhaps text on the back, scuffing and dirt point to the use of images or, indeed, neglect of images. For instance, a small group of photographs of bare-breasted Zulu women purchased by a soldier with the Wessex Yeomanry during the South African War (1899–1902) bear the marks of constant handling: dirty thumb marks, missing and torn corners, a central crease caused by constant folding and unfolding.⁷ One senses strongly the embodiment of the colonial gaze, of an image actually being handled, put away, brought out. While such a reading must remain conjectural, it does at least point to an object that was not merely purchased and filed away but used, and engaged with constantly. It bears the marks of its own history as an object. Likewise, albums with missing pages and missing images might be seen in this way. What were the circumstances of this material intervention in the narrative?

Perhaps one of the most widespread social uses of photographs is as objects of exchange. While the image itself is of course central to the act of giving, receiving and utilising, the materiality of the photograph is equally part of the social meaning of exchanges. This is made explicit in this volume in the cases discussed by Porto, Schwartz, Chalfen and Murui and implicit in much of Batchen's discussion of photographic jewellery. The implications of the gifting relationship are in these examples, and many others one can think of, integral to the meaning of the photograph as object in the gestures that recapitulate or re-enact different forms of social relations. Which photographs become exchange objects and within which contexts?

In other relationships photographs are used as votive offerings, as objects of intercession. In many instances layers of photographs accrue around religious figures and shrines: examples can be found almost everywhere in Catholic Europe and in Latin America. Family photographs, wedding photographs, even foetal scans, become votive offerings, objects mediating between peoples and their god. In religious usage the image is perhaps sacralised through its material proximity with a religious figure. At the same time they become a sort of archaeology of photographic practices and photographic usage, the objects scarred by their use, bent, dust covered and cracked. Image-object has moved into sacred space, assuming new meanings. However, these processes are again profoundly culture specific. Both Harris and Hanganu in this volume show how images used in religious contexts become invested with sanctity, and the way in which the indexicality of the image vested is a culturally constructed notion of matter.

Materiality also extends the indexicality of the image through both bodily interactions with the photo-object, especially the tactile, and through interventions with the indexical image. Photographs can be touched or worn or, as Harris identifies in this volume, can involve conjunctures with parts of the body such as the feet, which are inextricably linked to the differentiated cultural specifics of body language. Batchen's chapter in this volume further highlights the importance of touch when he refers to such things as transference of heat to a metal-cased photographic locket as it is held in the hand and to the placing of photographs when worn round the neck, on the hand, on the breast. Photographs that become fetishised are also often subject to touch, and specifically the touch of desire. Frames of carved wood, velvet, silk or fur can work in this way. Likewise, overpainting extends, and moves, beyond the indexical trace of the image itself to add other layers of meaning. Further, material acts on photographs illuminate responses to the indexicality of images. Surface interventions and additive techniques have also permeated photographic

practice. At its simplest level this was merely a matter of adding colour to monochrome images, a common practice from the earliest period, as evidenced by hand-tinted daguerreotypes (such as that discussed by Schwartz), ambrotypes, tintypes and later albumen prints, including the fine tinted productions of studios in Japan. However, as Batchen demonstrates, other materials such as hair, or perhaps cloth, might be added to the image, extending its indexicality and thus the understanding and effectiveness of the photographic image.

In some cultures it is sometimes the additive and interventionist techniques applied to photographs that render the image complete and real. For instance, the 'reality' of portrait photographs in India is constructed through material and additive interventions with the surface of the image. Overpainting and collage are integral to the meaning of the photograph. They extend its indexicality, which is seen as a baseline for a photograph, not as the complete rendering of an identity; instead the identity recorded in the photograph is extended and enhanced, revealing a form of inner self through material surface additions to the photograph itself (Pinney 1997:137). Similarly, as Buckley has shown, photographers in The Gambia cut up photographs, rearranging the surface of the image, or superimposing other images, including publicly available images of pop stars, beauty queens or religious leaders. This aesthetic, called 'double impact' locally, is premised on an exploration of the surfaces and the edges of a person as an expression of identity. Consequently, material edges within these constructed photographic objects become integral to the social expectation and the 'reality effects' of the photographs (Buckley 2000:81).

While the surface interventions that appear in this book are less dramatic, they none the less can be viewed in the same connection—as extending and focusing the meaning of the image. It is through material intervention and presentational form that people mark their own desires on the machine-produced or mass-produced object of modernity, reasserting the user as author. This is very clear in Nordström's chapter as the traveller Tupper re-authors commercially produced photographs, domesticating them, sequencing them so as to perform materially his own experience, as he chose to present it. In many ways it is the materiality of people's photographs that make them 'their own'.

Conclusion

Postcards, albums, campaign buttons, decorated photographs carried behind the open coffin at Russian funerals, the photographic placards of mass demonstration or political processions, T-shirts or photographs of ancestors worn in the dance in a Native American community—the possible material forms in which photographs are consumed are almost limitless. We have only been able to touch on this ubiquitous and all-saturating world of the photograph-object. There are many ways in which the idea of photographs as material culture might be developed and elucidated—the phenomenological, the sensory, psychology of perception, through enhanced readings of the subjecthood of the viewer, studies of consumption, history of collecting, history of exhibition presentation, the study of both exhibition and domestic frames, the ethnography of photographic practices in many parts of the world. Even in the digital age, when the materiality of many images