More Than Meets The Eye: Toward an Ontology of Proximity

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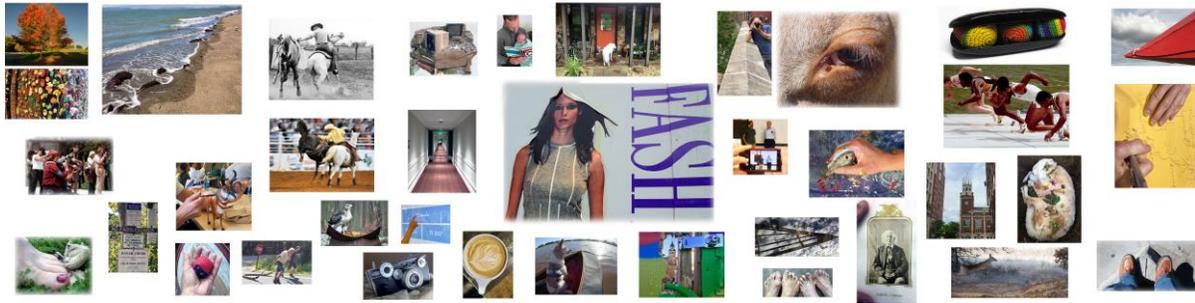
Photo mural *Meaning on the Wall* for Document Academy 2019

All of photography can be summarized as photons in, photons out.
(E. O'Connor, 2009)

The very things which an artist would leave out, or render imperfectly, the photograph takes infinite care with, and so makes its illusions perfect. What is the picture of a drum without the marks on its head where the beating of the sticks has darkened the parchment? (Holmes, 1859)

Human vision is a matter of photons exciting receptors; so, in a general sense, photographs require little in the way of decoding. The photon data of any photograph maps the surface of what was in front of the camera with exquisite empiricism, much as does the human eye at any point in time. There is a difference, though, between the camera and the brain – the brain generally has a conceptual construct within which to make use of the eye's image Any individual photograph has specific photon data, but any particular viewer may not have adequate contextual constructs to be able to make use (make sense) of the photograph. The photon data puts our eyes in proximity to the original scene.

Churchland makes the useful distinction between the visual system that records the "spatiotemporal particulars currently displayed before its lens" and the "landscape or configuration of the abstract universals, the temporal invariants, and the enduring symmetries of the of objective universe of [the brain's] experience" (Churchland, 2012, p. vii). Photographs yield data based on physical proximity, but do not necessarily yield functionality for viewers with little or no contextual data. We use the term anecdata for those synchronic attributes, those characteristics of a message that are subject to change with time and circumstance, and which are not readily available or easily knowable.

How do photographs mean?

We take meaning to be essentially synonymous with function. Simply receiving a message does not mean one can act upon it. Receiving a message such as Θουκυδίδης Ἀθηναῖος ξυνέγραψε τὸν πόλεμον τῶνΠελοποννησίων καὶ Ἀθηναίων, ὡς ἐπολέμησαν πρὸςἀλλήλους is likely for many to mean only "it's Greek to me." Even a translation into a more familiar coding scheme may be of only a little more utility depending on background knowledge and circumstances: Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the war of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians as they warred against each other.

Words cannot describe photographs in the same sense that key words or subject headings can describe verbal documents because words are not native elements of photographs. Even using words to describe subject data of a photograph are at least translations: it is quite likely that someone could say there is a lot of red in the photograph below; yet, there is no place in the image where "red" occurs. It is the case that there are many pixels with values close to Red 197, Green 19, Blue 36 that activate the human visual system in a way that is often labeled "red." Words can describe anecdata – reactions and associations that might be functional.
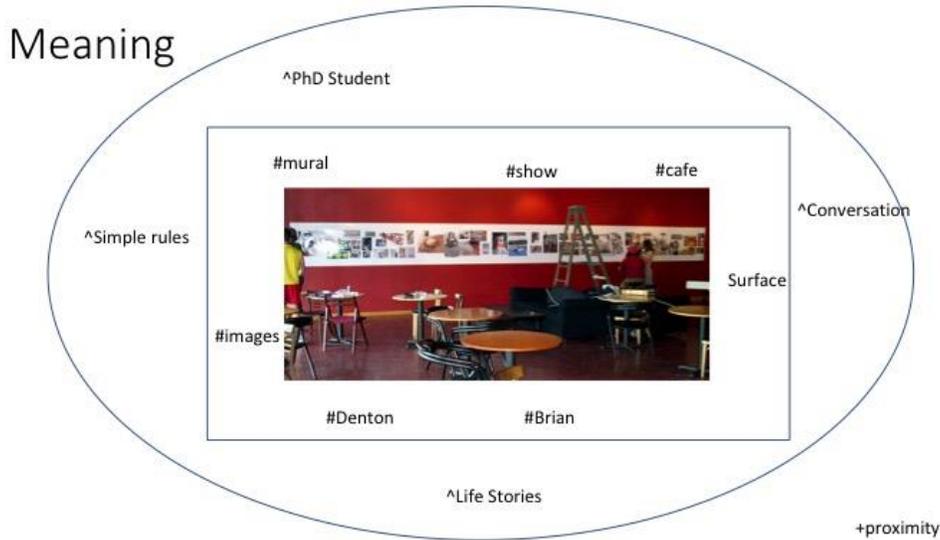
In 2004, we hung a 30-foot-long photomural in a gallery coffee shop and asked/allowed people to write on the print over a one-month period. We thought the physical presence of the collection as a whole together with social interaction might provide clues to what is needed/wanted for functionality of photographs. For DOCAM 2019, we wanted to compare reactions to some of the same individual images in a mural format. In both cases we were interested in verbalization of reactions to photographs. Since words are not native elements of photographs but we often use words to describe our reactions to photographs, we looked to written comments as clues to reactions – threads connecting photon data to utility.

Beyond being able to see the photon data for a woman or a dog or a boat, how do we think about photographs? How do we look for an image that reminds us of summer time in Kansas, or makes us think of desolation or love? Might it help to know what the photographer was thinking? Would it help to know how others reacted? Does the size of a photo presentation matter? Does moving along a mural inspire a form of narrativity? We were curious to see if the necessity of moving (at least the eyes) along a set of images not intended to be a coherent narrative would still provoke some form of narrativity in the broadest sense. Would the bright red in both upper corners be noticed and commented on? Would the large number of hands get a mention? Would anyone ask why there are feet in the two bottom corners?

We had numerous comments written by a variety of viewers of the first photomural and we wanted to see if we could find any commonalities between those and any comments from another photomural. The display space for the second piece precluded simply hanging a new copy of the first mural. We selected a small subset of the original image set based largely upon the sorts of comments attached to them.

This in itself was intriguing; the process of mulling over the differences in the two installations was fruitful; and the process of preparing the reprise was at once delightful, thought provoking, maddening, and extraordinary. Engaging with the images again – both those from the first piece and the combination of new and re-used pieces in the second piece – was exhilarating and challenging. There is a good deal of personal history bound up in the individual images and in the making and showing of the first mural.

We prepared the mural for the Document Academy gathering as an exercise in reprising a creative work from 15 years earlier and as a data gathering mechanism for our continuing work on proximity and anecdata. Things did not go as planned. Unavoidable delays in hanging the piece and the venue (not the relaxed environment of a coffee shop), seem to have dissuaded conferees from engaging with the mural with pens in hand. This was a disappointment. However, we soon realized that our planning of the new mural in and of itself provided a rich set of data and thoughts for sketching out an approach to photographs, anecdata, and proximity. In the tradition of the Document Academy we present that sketch here.

**Coding, decoding, spatiotemporal particulars,
and landscape(s) abstract universals**

Understanding can be taken as the ability to do something with or because of a message – a means of bringing information to the point of use. We start Shannon's cleaving of meaning from message. Some form of data is coded in some medium, transmitted, received, and decoded. Some forms of coding and circumstances of message making and decoding require little proximity of the recipient to the message maker, while some forms utterly depend on proximity.

Photon data from photographs presents to the eye/brain surfaces proximate to the camera at the time of coding the photograph; however, it does not necessarily present data on time, place, what was outside the frame, why the particular surfaces were selected, why a particular data recording technique was employed. In some circumstances this may be an acceptable state of affairs. It may be possible that the simple surface data is all that is requires by a particular user for a particular use. In other circumstances, data beyond the surface data may be utterly necessary. Anecdata affords pathways, points to details that cast light on proximities that might otherwise go unknown. As we see in the tale of Theseus slaying the Minotaur, yet depending on Ariadne for his own escape from the labyrinth, even the most slender thread can hold or bespeak significant proximity.

The proximity need not be to the original maker of the photographic message or even to the object recorded. It may even be that the original photographer will have a different decoding of the photographic message at some subsequent viewing time.

**Some examples of anecdata and thoughts on possible utility**

This image appears in the lower left portion of our DOCAM 2019 mural. On one level it is simply a photograph of somebody holding up blue reading glasses to a toy animal's eyes. It might be useful at this level of decoding as a PowerPoint illustration for "Pay close attention" or "Read your hunting regulations carefully." Those familiar with the Document Academy would likely recognize this as the antelope mascot of the group; while yet others would know from having attended DOCAM in Indiana, that this is Laurie Bonnici holding up her glasses to the antelope and that Frances Vitali is visible in the background and the photo was made by Brian O'Connor. Knowing these details would give some context to the image of a smartphone making an image of Michael Buckland, just to the right of the "FASH" photo in the center. Even that sentence demonstrates the issues we are exploring because one would have to know that Michael Buckland was in attendance at the Indiana gathering.

The "FASH" photo had appeared in the 2004 mural and was the object of some speculation in written and verbal comments. In the earlier mural is was not quite so large and was not centered in the mural. The image shot and used without cropping, that is, the original did not present any additional surface data. Many viewers to interpret the straight-edged angle on top to the head to be a paper pirate hat or other such whimsical head gear. "FASH" seemed perplexing to most who commented. The subject was actually a much larger than life-size image of a model, cut out and pasted to a construction wall, with weather and time having caused delamination around the edges – thus the pirate hat look. FASH is simply the first part of FASHION COMPLEX. The image was made in Las Vegas in 2003, when digital cameras were beginning to overtake film cameras. Brian was attending a photo convention and was taken by the NIKON ads on the tops of taxis "You have to love a town where image is everything!" The delaminating image seemed a cute counterpoint to the ad. Having the freedom to shoot lots of images without worrying about processing costs for film was part of the plan for taking the walk on which the photo was shot. In retrospect Interestingly, this entire
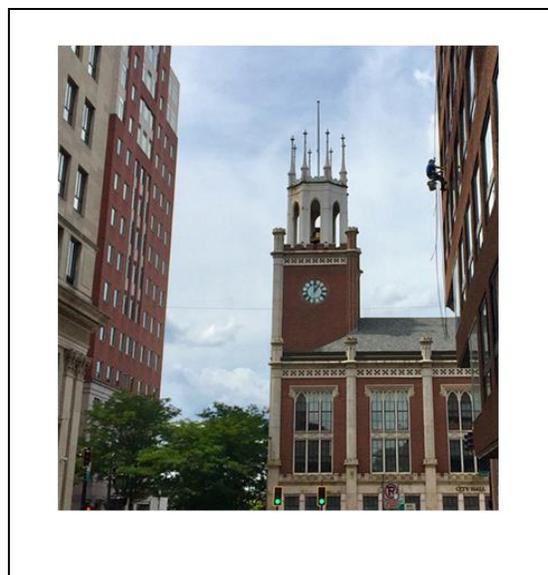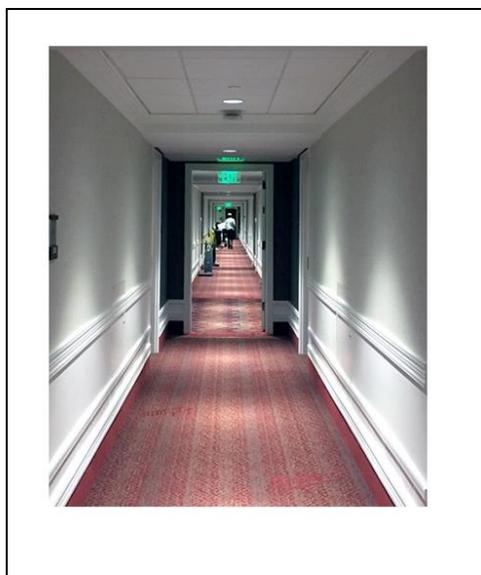
paragraph is some metadata "…larger than life-size image of a model, cut out and posted to a construction wall…" with lots of anecdata (nearly the remainder of the content).

At first glance this might seem to be a simple, formalist photograph of a long hallway. As such it might be useful for representing the corridor of time, a long-term undertaking, a sad farewell, or just a pattern of straight lines broken up by a bit of human activity. For those who had their own physical proximity to the antelope above – folks who attended DOCAM in Indiana, this might look familiar as the on-campus hotel, though not many folks keep track of hotel hallway design and décor. In the sense of presenting these images in the mural format, we wondered if there would have been a "narrative" connection made between this hallway photo and the antelope photo – would comments on the one informed understanding of the other. Would anyone have assumed the interior image and the exterior image were the same building because of their proximity in the mural? Likewise, would there have been any explicit connections made between this architectural photo with a tiny amount of human form and this architectural photo with a tiny human form. For that matter, would anyone comment – as did someone who happened to be at the site of the original: "Looks like King Kong got the wrong building!" The distribution of similar colors and the converging parallel lines might set up a resonant pair for decorating a space. The exterior image is the city hall in Manchester, New Hampshire. Does that mean something?

This image has had a lot of comments in other venues; one informal interaction at DOCAM 2019 was similar to most of the other comments. On the surface, this is a white dog with pretty flowers, plant material, and assorted other objects. Terms such as pretty, beautiful, natural have been quite prevalent. When it is revealed that the dog has just been euthanized, most commenters have replied: "I am so sorry" or "How sad." Brian had the privilege of living with the dog for many years, so it is at once lovely and sad for him. The dog often watched over the yard where he builds boats, so there are pieces from one of the boats on her and the flowers come from her favorite parts of the yard. The image does not

show that she is already in the bottom of a grave. Would that make a difference to meaning for some viewers?

The grey scale image of two horses and a rider was in the 2004 mural, while the full color image was made 10 years later. They were placed together in our DOCAM mural to see if there would be comments on similarities. In both photos, the men are not competitors rather they are pickup men who remove some of the rigging from the bucking horse and help get the animal back to the chutes. This is a rather mundane part of the rodeo for many viewers, yet a task requiring skill, strength, and agility.

The top image was used in previous work (O'Connor, 1999) in which we asked viewers to describe images and the asked cataloguers to describe the same images. Viewers tended to describe actions and apply adjectives – "rugged," "strong," "amazing skill" – while cataloguers tended to apply nouns – "Cowboys," "Horsemen and Horsewomen."

The postures of the riders are remarkably similar even though the one in the top images is working on a horse whose head is toward the camera, while the one on the bottom works on a horse whose tail is toward the camera. To whom would the difference matter? Does the color add or detract for some particular use of such an image? For whom would it matter that one is in California and one is in Texas?
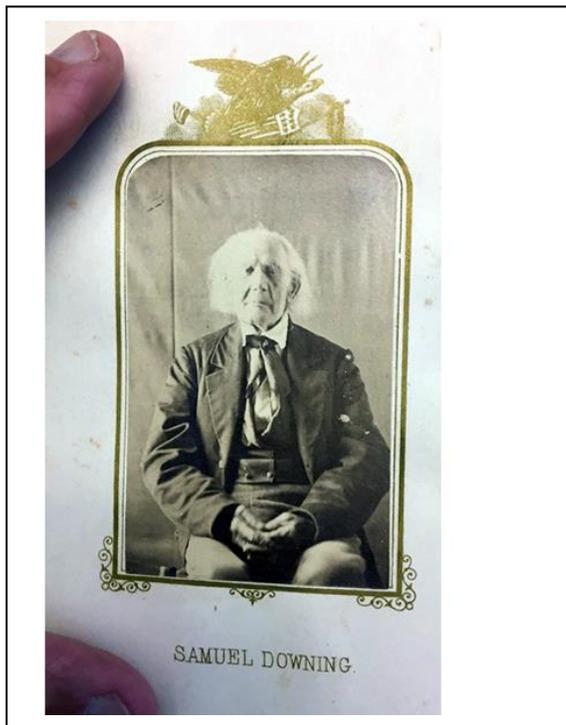
SAMUEL DOWNING.

This photograph (Hillard, 1864) is quite ordinary on its surface, perhaps even clumsy looking with the inclusion of someone's fingers. Anyone can do an online search for Samuel Downing and find a "better" version of this photograph. This photograph was made explicitly to represent the materiality of this particular version of the photo of Samuel Downing. It appears in an original edition of *The Last Men of the Revolution. A Photograph of Each from Life*, published in 1864. Rev. E. R. Hillard interviewed the last seven living veterans of the American Revolution and made a photograph of each one. In 1864 there was no half-tone printing or any other method of rapid printing of photos in a print run of a book. Each of the photographs in all of the copies is handmade and glued into place. So, when you are touching the photograph you can feel that it is a separate piece of material; also, you are touching a print made by someone who chatted with veterans of the Revolution and some of the last people to have lived in a time before photography.
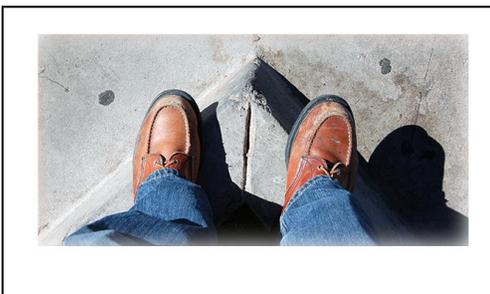
What is presented in this photograph? Concrete surfaces, rather like a street corner, jeans, and work boots. This might be useful for illustrating ruggedness or the paving over the land or having to choose a path or side. The boots, jeans, and concrete were photographed on a corner in Winslow, Arizona – playing on the line from the song "Take it Easy" by the Eagles: "Well I'm a standin' on a corner in Winslow, Arizona / Such a fine sight to see / It's a girl my lord in a flatbed Ford / Slowin' down to take a look at me" (Browne, 1972). There is a statue and a plaque in Winslow, Arizona at *the* corner, yet there is no particular corner actually specified in the lyrics.

We added signature footnotes to the mural. This photo of toes and a wild mushroom was made at the time of the 2004 mural of Laurie's left foot. It anchors the lower left of the 2019 mural, in symmetry with the above photo of Brian's shoes in Arizona. We thought this added both a personal touch and a bit of humor. It seems unlikely that any such interpretation of the photos viewed individually would be likely.

Photographic proximity

Perhaps the comments on some of the images from our DOCAM 2019 begin to incarnate the skeleton of photographic proximity, to illustrate the difference between the photons striking the eye/brain and having context for those photons; to illustrate Churchland's "spatiotemporal particulars currently displayed before its lens" and the "landscape or configuration of the abstract universals, the temporal invariants, and the enduring symmetries of the of objective universe of [the brain's] experience."

We suggest that a first order taxonomy of proximity comes into play. For some uses, very general notions of what surfaces and what coding practices recorded a particular set of surface data: cute photo of reading glasses on a toy antelope; for

some uses, a deeper level of specificity: DOCAM in Indiana; and for other uses, even more specificity, of a sort that might be hard to come upon: glasses and antelope photo was made by the authors of this piece, the glasses had made their first appearance at DOCAM in Denton, Texas, and the glasses disappeared a little later. : Albannai (2016) presents several examples of conversational use of photographs on Facebook that speak both to threads of proximity and to the collaborative environment in which we can now discover, request, and contribute to such threads. This image (Myans, 1936) from the Library of Congress (labeled "Cigar store Indian,

Manchester, New Hampshire") was part of a discussion thread on a Facebook page concerned with the history of the city. Comments included: "My mom said this was on the corner of bridge and elm st"; "She is 95 … she remembers a man named Bernie who worked there"; "my Dad used to stop there for his newspaper, of course smokes, and always treat for me and my sister"; and "My mother took me there to buy cigars for my father for Christmas." We have here locative information that does not exist in the Library of Congress record, and we have threads of how the store fit into the life of the city. Perhaps most demonstrative of the notion of threads of proximity is this comment on the same picture: "Saw that photo on a wall in Denny's [restaurant] in CA a couple years ago. Asked our young waiter if he knew where it was taken and why. He didn't so we told him. He found the story interesting and promised to share it with the rest of the staff" – note Denny's in CA is about 3,000 miles from the corner of Bridge and Elm Streets, in Manchester.

The examples we presented and the work of Albannai demonstrate three levels of generality: any image with a particular object or characteristic will do; an image with certain qualities and intriguing connections is wanted; the photograph must show particular qualities or have a backstory that is explicit as to why this is the most useful image. Yet each those three regions on a spectrum of utility can function along several vectors. Before the emergence of the digital environment discussions of subtleties of photographic representation were generally the realm of only a few professionals working with photographs for advertising, photojournalism, or illustrating books; on a smaller, though no less important scale, We might here expand the idea of a taxonomy of proximity into the more inclusive, environmental notion of an ontology of proximities – referring to types of connections, types of uses, and circumstances of discovering the threads.

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