

Bio

Phil Hill is a photographic artist whose practice is concerned with community, connection and identity. Phil aims to examine these concepts by also drawing attention to processes of photography and its qualities, questioning the way we place value on them. Phil's focus is on long-term socially engaged projects, writing, and teaching.

Image as Currency

My 2-year-old received many gifts over the festive period from my wife's extended family as we made our annual pilgrimage to visit. *"Make sure you take a picture of her wearing it and send it to your aunt to say thanks."* In fact, all of the gifts that we received would need to be meticulously documented and catalogued so that these photographs could be shared with the giver of the presents, or donor, as way of a thank you and proof that the gift was gratefully received. I then started to consider the value of these images being requested and what happens to this value once the initial reason for the record has been completed and once they are part of the sea of images.

Vernacular photographs can be thought of as currency - a term that could be used to describe how images are used, appropriated and ultimately how they inappropriately

propose evidence in what Barthes termed a 'certification of presence' (1993, p. 87) in that we must provide others with an ongoing, online record of achievement, no matter how menial that might be. This is the new accepted normal as we contribute endless numbers of images to the digital record. Image currency as an acceptance of the ubiquity of images and need to show oneself to others. In this description of the image, photography becomes a form of transaction, promising to pay the bearer on demand, though not to be confused with the commercial sense of the term (photographic skills exchanged for their monetary worth). The value I refer to is the emotional and moral exchange that takes place through sharing images. Photographs that are designed to reduce your own value and the value of others through the intersectionality this creates (Lutz & Collins, 1991, p. 135); Images that provide an emotive moment, one way or the other (Barthes, 1993, p. 27) resonating and lingering with us.

John Tagg interprets Barthes assertions by referring to how the image's indexical appearance can create falsehoods; the very existence of an image cannot safely assure us that the thing photographed existed (1988, p. 2). The meaning of a photograph is tied very closely to the referent and can easily be confused as such, yet Tagg supports the idea of an

image playing its role in meaningful transactions, but urges us not to believe its perceived truth (p. 3).

When considering the recipient of the 'thank-you' image, our donor, who views it; is the reader, and the one who derives meaning from it; they are still the most important when an image is used as currency, as a transaction. There is a ubiquity of imagery online, one that creates a second by second account of human existence, in what Geoffrey Batchen terms "A social Imperative" (1999, p. 36) However, our lives online are drawn from a tight editing process to seek visual gratification for something that may not even exist. A show-and-tell of some new stuff, a summer holiday, a child's achievement, all of which are socially abstract from the time, emotion and work it took to get there. Yet we share them without the nuance and expect acknowledgement for this idealistic life all the same. This is a more readily understandable transaction occurring between the author and the reader of the image. Authors seeks validation and gratification that one has lived; the reader will provide that validation and appropriate the image to suit their own gratification. This is an emotional attribution to the image, one that forms a kind of tangible link to a virtual and contextually devoid online world.

This emotional attribution also happens when viewing sporting events - when we root for our team to win, we react in what is known as the 'spectating brain,' placing ourselves into the role of the athlete on the field gaining a real sense of connection to the sport but without any verbal communication or physical link to the act of taking part (Borrelli, 2016). It is something that can be palpably felt through a TV screen, or the mobile devices we interact with daily. We mirror those feelings after witnessing others perform, which then creates implications in the way we read each other's emotions and also how we empathize with them (Winerman, 2005, p. 48).

After the transaction has happened, the image becomes essentially meaningless and removed from its intended use: it is redundant and the thing that we photograph has been appropriated (Sontag, 1979, p. 4). The context has fallen away, however the image can assume new meaning other than its denoted content by entering into the mythology of family narrative. This image that has been used as thanks, that was a perfunctory exchange is now part of an intimate family record, which may regain some of their value over time, re-appropriated by nostalgia and in the context of historical intrigue. Both the author and donor-reader are now fulfilled in a way that may not happen through the simple text, letter,

or email. They can see this indexical '*evidence*' that forms a tangible link; the emotional connection to object, person and place.

The thank you image transaction is part of the wider discussion on the complacent proliferation of images. If we view photography as a type of currency, it would be in the form of a traded commodity exchanged for emotional validation, whether positive, or a negative one. Our culture encourages it, and capitalism demands it, defining our very freedom on the ability to continue consuming (Sontag, 1979, p. 178). The thank you image is just another part of this plurality that exists in photography. We placate, take more, and validate more, yet the need for more images continues.

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