Corresponding Associations: the Poetics and Limits of Photography as Dialogue

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Abstract

Over the past decade, an increasing number of artists have engaged in photographic projects involving image-based dialogue. These invariably take the form of back-and-forth exchanges of photographs, animated over extended periods of time and often across continents. The immediate context for these dialogues is networked photography – photo-messaging and social media – that also enables people to share photographs in a conversational manner. This article explores a variety of artist-led photographic exchange and correspondence projects and proposes that such experiments reveal a number of distinctive qualities about photographs taken in response to an image made by another, and in anticipation of a visual response. The article concludes by probing the parameters and limits of photo-dialogues for both artists and viewers.

Keywords: dialogue, visual exchange, art photography, social media photography, authorship

> Thanks to what, in the image, is purely image (which is in fact very little), we do without language yet never cease to understand one another. (Barthes 1977b, 61)

> It is only when we see difference and repetition, comparison, contrast and dialogue *between* images that we can be relieved and stimulated. (Campany 2003, 34)

Following the terrorist attack in New Zealand on 15 March 2019, a striking visual response appeared in my Instagram feed. It comprised a black square with a text below it extending condolences to the Muslim community in Christchurch, posted by a well-known Iranian-born Australian artist. If the black square symbolized "one of New Zealand's darkest days" as Prime Minster Jacinda Arden had already described the event, it was also, emphatically, not photography. Implicitly recognizing that a

photograph would fail to reckon with the atrocity, it followed a long critical tradition in photographic theory in which individual images have been considered inadequate. If, as Susan Sontag argued, following Bertolt Brecht, "Only that which narrates can make us understand" (Sontag 1977, 23), the single photograph is doomed to superficiality. Part of the problem with the single image is that because photographs are mute, we can only imagine their "speech." As signifiers, photographs either say too little or too much – which is why in most contexts photographs come with a written supplement, to overcome their assumed deficit or to tame an unruly surplus of latent meaning. Consequently, as Walter Benjamin wrote enthusiastically in his 1931 essay "A Small History of Photography," the caption becomes photography's most important feature (Benjamin 1979, 256). A linguistic caption *anchors* the image, selectively elucidating its meaning, as Roland Barthes put it (1977a, 41), which holds true wherever photographs are required for evidence or communication, notably photojournalism and advertising.

Photojournalists and artists alike have developed strategies such as the photo-essay and photo-series as a way to narrate or develop an idea through images. But in the twentieth century, only art photographers embraced the ambiguity of the "untitled" image as a poetic virtue. However, in the age of ubiquitous smartphone photography, photo-messaging apps and social media provide a context for people to share photographs without relying on a textual crutch. For instance, my extended family commonly exchange images of our evening meals. Our family ritual of image exchange is an example of ephemeral "visual chit chat" (Villi 2010, 150) – as mobile phone messaging has been described – enabled by a commonly understood set of conventions. And the exchange typically culminates in a range of emojis – a love heart, thumbs up, exclamation mark – that is, the limited emotional register currently available on the iPhone's native message app. Words often follow. Nevertheless, even such a primitive example, intelligible through shared

cultural values, demonstrates that a sequence of images operates as a new form of communication. Arguably, when photographs are followed by other photographs, a shared visual language emerges.

The exchange of photographs is as old as the medium itself – and proliferated with cartes de visites, postcards, and most recently on social media. But the back-and-forth exchange of photographs without words appears to be as rare as the exchange of images for other images in the history of art. Certain Surrealist projects explored image exchange – notably the drawing game known as the Exquisite Corpse, concocted in 1925 by the Surrealists André Breton, Yves Tanguy, Jacques Prévert, and Marcel Duchamp, in which participants take turns drawings sections of a body on a sheet of paper – starting with a head – which is then folded to hide each individual contribution before being passed to the next player. The resulting creature – typically strange, comical or grotesque – is collaboratively produced, but the game is not a dialogue, since it involves no listening and response. A contemporary update, in which participants progressively Photoshop an image – known as Photoshop Tennis – even adopts a competitive approach. In the 1960s and 1970s, various instructional projects by conceptual artists used photographs as a way to elicit more photographs, sometimes shared with others as part of the "mail art" movement.[1] However, it seems the practice of artists pursuing a direct and extended dialogue with photographs might be unique to the communicative possibilities enabled by networked digital media.

Over the past decade, we have seen a notable increase in projects involving an ongoing back-and-forth exchange of photographs between two artists, animated over time and often across continents. These *photo-dialogues*, as I will call them, are conversations with photos rather than about photos – each one eliciting a permutational unfolding of images – that are quite distinct both from practices in visual anthropology such as Photovoice, in which photographs are used to elicit conversation, and from postmodern practices, in which artists quote

or restage from the canon of art and photographic history in order to question or play with cultural authority. In the rest of this article, I explore the possibilities and limits of photography as dialogue through the prism of artist-led photographic exchange and correspondence projects. By looking at four prominent projects to date, a number of questions immediately arise: how have they emerged and why? Who is involved and what kind of dialogues develop? What are their rules and parameters? What happens to style and authorship, when photographers make photographs in response to other people's photographs? How are viewers positioned in relation to the photographic prompts? How do we evaluate these photo-dialogues?

Networked photography as a context for photo-dialogues

Nothing prevented photographers from engaging in photo-dialogues before digital media. A photographer could send an image via the postal service, and someone else could respond to it with another image. But that process was slow and expensive, making momentum difficult to sustain. Digitization, the movement of photography online, and camera phones have of course fundamentally altered the possibilities for such an image exchange, by dramatically changing how we produce, share, and view photographic images. As early as 2005, camera phone photographs were discussed in terms of "visible speech" (Rubinstein 2005), owing in part to their ephemerality. Back when Flickr was the dominant platform for photo-sharing, scholars identified that digital networks were leading to the production of more banal photographs among ordinary people, featuring "mundane" subject matter (Murray 2008). In his account of social media, anthropologist Vincent Miller (2008) argued that communicative culture online was becoming a "phatic culture," marked by increasingly image-dominated modes of communication. Miller argued that communicative practice in today's world of networked sociality has transitioned from conversations with content to

merely connecting for the sake of connecting – for reaffirming one's personal networks. To think about the notion of photography as dialogue today, we must inevitably consider this broader transition in everyday photography from it being primarily about memory to a more instantaneous form of social communication.

The democratization of the smartphone over the past decade has rapidly consolidated this *conversational* nature of everyday photographic practice. Photographs immediately shared offer visual observations that say not only "look at this" but "here I am, this is what I am doing," which implicitly asks "what do you think of this?" This shift, from a photograph as a *record* to a *prompt*, is significant, given the huge number of images uploaded to social media platforms. As anthropologist Daniel Miller puts it, not only has social media "given photography an unprecedented ubiquity as part of daily life" but "the vast majority of all photography today now is social media photography" (2016a, 156). Accordingly, photography has been transformed from the status of a ritual performed on special occasions to the most mundane of activities, in which "dozens of images can now flow within a few minutes as an ongoing conversation" (Miller 2016a, 156). Each new online platform appears to take this a step further. Thus, "Instagram … takes us one more stage than Facebook, from photography as memory to photography as social communication, where photographs are posted to elicit comments and 'likes'" (Miller 2016b, 8). Snapchat – where images or short videos sent to friends self-delete after 10 seconds – appears to complete the shift:

> A ten-second lifespan cannot possibly be associated with memorialization or the materiality of the image. We have to take the word "Snapchat" literally – the photograph is just a form of chat … Snapchat is the culmination of a movement more generally in photography from memorialization to communication. (Miller 2016b, 10)

If communication itself has "become more visual," for Miller "it is now possible to hold something very close to a conversation that is almost entirely without voice or text (Miller 2016a, 177). Note that Miller stops short of actually equating photographic exchanges with conversation; it is simply "very close." Likewise, he writes elsewhere that "photography is almost analogous to language itself" (2016b, 14). Given this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that photographer-poets, namely artists, have explored the potential of this new "near conversational" condition.

Marcelo Brodsky: *Visual Correspondences* (2006–10)

Argentinian artist Marcelo Brodsky initiated an early example of digitally enabled photographic exchange in 2006. *Visual Correspondences* (2006–10) included exchanges between Brodsky and Catalonia photographer Manel Esclusa, Mexican photographer Pablo Ortiz Monasterio, English photographer Martin Parr, Brazilian photographer Cássio Vasconcellos, and the German artist Horst Hoheisel (who drew pictures in response to photographs). Each correspondence consisted of a series of images e-mailed between Brodsky and his interlocutors, in which each artist would reply to the image he received (they were all male) to produce an intuitive non-verbal exchange. Brodsky's first "correspondence," with his teacher

Esclusa, was a poetic triptych of a building reflected in water, directly informed and inspired by Brodsky's knowledge of Esclusa's work. The image has been described by Eduardo Cadava as an "encryption" of Esclusa's photographic obsessions (Cadava and Nouzeilles 2013, 34). Another correspondence involved a triptych with a snake and the skin it leaves behind, which, as Cadava notes, by implying a memory trace of the passage of time, "meditates self-reflexively on the photographic medium" (36). Responses from other participants pertained variously to the figures, forms, and colors in each image. Cadava describes it as a "speculative game of mirroring" (36). Quite literally, he notes, "reflections operate in these photographs as a means of photography photographing itself" (36).

Brodsky's *Visual Correspondences* was one inspiration for a three-year research project by Eduardo Cadava and Gabriela Nouzeilles called *Itinerant Languages of Photography*, involving international conferences and workshops, culminating in an exhibition and book. Against the vague and contested post-war notion of photography as a "universal language," the project conceived of photography as a transnational practice of circulation and citation, or "itinerant languages," in which photographs are constantly recontextualized as they travel around the world. But as Cadava also notes, it is "photography's universally (yet variably) perceived 'self-

Figure 1. One of Manel Esclusa's responses to a triptych sent by Marcelo Brodsky as part of *Visual Correspondences/Correspondencias visuals*: Manel Esclusa–Marcelo Brodsky, 2006–10. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 2. A selection of photographs exchanged as part of *Visual Correspondences/Correspondencias visuals*: Martin Parr–Marcelo Brodsky, 2006–10. Courtesy of the artists.

evidentiality' that contributes to its potency as a language of suasion across national and linguistic barriers'' (Cadava and Nouzeilles 2013, 32). A workshop and exhibition of *Visual Correspondences* at the Slought Foundation in 2011 was accompanied by a discussion with the artists. In this discussion, the transnational character of the exchanges was pronounced, but the emphasis was also on what the system of image exchange does to the role of the viewer. According to Brodsky, when a viewer looks at the *Correspondences* they have a ''chance to participate in the work by looking for the relationship between the images'' to ask ''what triggered the response?''[2] For Parr, the images are refreshing because they force us to look at photographs at a visual level rather than as directed messages (as he points out, most photographs that we encounter – whether advertising, travel, or personal – are trying to sell or promote something). Parr treated the project as a visual game, consistent with the visual wit that has become his signature style.[3] Parr also acknowledged that it was also an opportunity for him to engage with his massive photographic archive. On this ''back catalogue,'' Brodsky spoke of ''rescuing moments of one's life'' – referring to his photographs that had not previously been exhibited or published.

Visual Correspondences is premised on a conventional ''epistolary exchange'' (Cadava and Nouzeilles 2013, 196), but underlying the project is an understanding that the movement of photographs around the world is now occurring at an unprecedented speed. If photographic meaning is fundamentally contingent on context, for Cadava, the movement of photographs across borders in

Visual Correspondences offers ''a kind of lens through which we might begin to trace the essential instability, indeterminacy, mobility and migratory and even serial character of all photographs'' (Cadava and Nouzeilles 2013, 36). But for all the theorization of the creative process in relation to the transnational ''other,'' an unacknowledged gendered bias in the project was also on full display at the 2011 discussion. Brodsky noted that ''you have to adapt to the other's discourse,'' but all the participants in the project were successful male artists of a certain generation (this lack of diversity became pronounced when two young women running a related workshop with local school students spoke at the end of the panel).[4] Without discrediting the project, this blind spot reveals what is already apparent: that the visual responses were shaped by shared personal histories and a particular sense of one's relationship to the history of photography. As Cadava writes: ''Each photographer or artist would respond to the other's last image, poetically or playfully – sometimes without knowing exactly why a particular response took a particular form – combining the chance of a kind of readymade with the complexity of photographic memory and production'' (Cadava and Nouzeilles 2013, 34). If the meaning of a photograph lies in its destination, that destination is both informed by established cultural values and yet constantly in motion.

Nat Ward and Ben Alper: *A New Nothing* (2014–)
In 2014, photographers Nat Ward and Ben Alper established the website *A New Nothing* (www.

Figure 3. *A New Nothing* (2014–), from a series of photographs exchanged between Irina Rozovsky (left) and Mark Steinmetz. Courtesy of Nat Ward and Ben Alper.

anewnothing.com). Ward and Alper had been exchanging images as a way of staying in touch, and found they could do so without words. Inspired by this experience, they invited photographer friends to undertake photo-based conversations of their own and developed the site as a host vehicle. The "about" page of the site remains as minimalist as the original idea: "Founded in 2014, a new nothing presents a series of two-person, image-based conversations. New conversations are added regularly." Over time, the site has grown to become a library of photo-dialogues, now hosting well over 100 "conversations" – active or archived – all following the same format, some over several years (and some apparently fizzling out after a few months). Each image (or short video) is identified only by the photographer's initial and the date it was sent. Despite its nihilistic-sounding name, *A New Nothing* suggests that the ubiquity of photography pushes it further towards the status of a language and this opens up new possibilities.[5] As Alper notes:

> the project has allowed me to think about image-based communication in similar terms as written or spoken language. Literary devices have been a huge inspiration … Considering how images might operate as metaphors, clichés, innuendos, hyperboles,

poems, or alliterations has provided an incredibly useful and surprising structure. (Baez and Alper 2019)

The use of found imagery by some of the participants adds a further layer of complexity, although most of the exchanges also involve down-to-earth humor. Ward points to visual puns and "the photographic equivalent of dad jokes" (Hughes 2017).

In *Aperture*, the writer Max Campbell (2017) describes *A New Nothing* as an "experimental platform for photographers." Alper refers to it as "a constellation of fragments [and] a platform that embraces ambiguity, subjectivity and play" (Baez and Alper 2019). Such formal innovations are of course familiar tropes in modernist fiction, and indeed the project has also spawned artisan books (such as Ben Alper and Nat Ward's *There There Now* [2016]). The very manner in which the photographs are presented on the website – the images scroll from left to right – involves a kind of reading. But since the most recent images comes first, a viewer sees the response before the prompt. Ward argues that "[t]he visual content has to talk from one image to the next, making and augmenting a legible kind of meaning along the way" (Campbell 2017). Some of the logics are difficult to penetrate; as Campbell suggests, scrolling through the

conversations can "feel like listening in on friends talking in the codes of inside jokes reserved for private spaces."

Although collaborative, the format seems to foreground the subjectivity of each photographer's approach and the expressive power of photographs – that is, a modernist sense of authorship. As Campbell (2017) notes, freeing the images from conventional sequencing or accompanying text "creates a spare, fluid atmosphere where subjectivity swells." Although *A New Nothing* now has a presence on Instagram, the overall project can be understood as a counterpoint to the paradoxical impersonality of social media performativity in favor of lyrical documentary approaches. And the fact that the dynamics of the conversations evolve in public provides an unusual context for the more intimate "conversations," such as that between Irina Rozovsky and Mark Steinmetz. Starting by photographing the same abandoned car in Athens, Georgia – one in color, the other in black and white – and ending four years later with reflective self-portraits, in between they shared photos from their daily routines, travels, and archives. As Rozovsky reflects of the "photo ping-pong": "For me it was from the start very exciting and intimate, to see our visual brains respond to each other – running with a formal theme, swerving this way and that, little jokes sprinkled lightly among the images" (Hughes 2017). Although the visual evidence is unclear, this particular exchange became a particularly close one; Rozovsky and Steinmetz have continued collaborating, and now have a baby daughter.

Talking Pictures: Camera-Phone Conversations between Artists at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2017)

Irina Rozovsky was also one of 12 artists chosen to participate in a series of camera phone dialogues exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2017.[6] Once again, personal life informed the conversation, since it became apparent that both she and her invited correspondent, Manjari Sharma, were pregnant. In 1996, Met curator Mia Fineman initiated a curatorial experiment, commissioning 12 US artists to engage in an extended image-only conversation with another artist friend of their choice. Fineman asked the artists "not to write messages or captions," but the content and frequency of communication was otherwise completely open. The invited artists included painters, video artists, and sculptors as well as photographers and filmmakers – from different backgrounds and locations – and elicited a wide range of approaches from the political to the personal. Given the project took place in the months after the 2016 US elections, politics and protest inform several of the visual conversations (such as those between Teju Cole and Laura Poitras, which use TV and newspaper headlines and other textual cues to invoke an undercurrent of militarized surveillance). By contrast, according to a *New Yorker* snippet, Rozovsky and Sharma's 122 "quiet color prints of their daily lives, in Brooklyn and Boston respectively, culminate in a pair of selfies with minutes-old newborns." Overall, as various critics noted, the results were uneven:

> there are lots of ways to use pictures to exchange information, and someday they may become something akin to separate dialects, with their own structures, grammars, and assumed behaviors. The projects on display span a wide range of modes of interaction, effectively running from intimately talking *with* someone to indifferently talking *at* them, with varying degrees of responsiveness and implied interest on the part of the two participants.
> (Knoblauch 2017)

In other words, if some of the projects merely underlined the sense of a missed encounter implied by a "phone tag," others made visible a certain distance in poetic and engaging ways.

As the first significant exhibition of camera-phone dialogues in a major museum, the curatorial construct of *Talking Pictures* is notable both for its exploration of an emerging cultural practice, and for grappling with the question of how to display

streams of photographs. Four techniques were presented, according to the style of the exchange – video screens on the wall offering slide-show effects, touch-screen tablets on tables where users can control the pace by swiping, photobooks on tables, and physical prints on the wall. Rozovsky and Sharma's images, singled out for praise above, were printed and arranged in a sequence that ran the entire length of one of the exhibition room's walls. For one critic, the photobooks were most successful, "the rhythm of the page turns reinforcing the back and forth of the artistic dialogue" (Knoblauch 2017). The screens naturally suited William Wegman and Tony Oursler's comical set of videos in which the artists talk to each other as if inside the medium (referencing Oursler's own work), as well as the more volleying approaches. In the exchange between Nina Katchadourian and Lenka Clayton, in which one copies the other, interpreting each image with a similar one, the rhythmic regularity of the slideshow suggests a relentless visual echo. Although most of the dialogues do not feature audio, the title of the exhibition is of course a reference to 1920s cinema, as silent films with subtitles gave way to synchronized sound technology. Just as the possibilities for narrative expression in cinema significantly expanded after this moment, the exhibition explored new possibilities for photo-based expression enabled by networked media. However, for pragmatic reasons, "the images were shared in iCloud rather than sent back and forth" and the artists were asked "to refrain from sharing their images on social media" (Knoblauch 2017).

David Campany and Anastasia Samoylova: *Dialogue* (2017–)

My final example, a joint project between David Campany and Anastasia Samoylova, exploits the social media platform Instagram as a means to enable a photo-dialogue.[7] Samoylova is a Russian-born photographer and installation artist based in Miami, USA. In 2016 Samoylova – whose work, according to one artist's statement, "interrogates notions of environmentalism, consumerism and the picturesque"[8] and

has long involved collections of images – had been a brief participant in a photo-dialogue with Charles Rubin on *A New Nothing*. In July 2017, feeling like she had an "image overflow," Samoylova invited the London-based Campany, whom she only knew by his writing and Instagram account, into a photo-dialogue on Instagram. Campany agreed, the account "@dialogue_aandd" was opened, log-in details shared, and so began an open-ended back-and-forth transnational visual exchange. The first photograph posted has the caption "Testing!!," the next few images arrive with text describing where the photograph was taken, but henceforth the images stand free of text. On some days as many as 25 images are exchanged, and by March 2019 nearly 3800 photographs had been posted to the Instagram account. Campany and Samoylova did not meet in person until several months into the project.

As a writer and curator, Campany is well known for his work on the dynamic relationship between photography and cinema, as well as practices of montage, seriality, and editing in photographic practice.[9] On his personal Instagram account – with over 50,000 followers – he posts visual notations of the modern city, deeply informed by the photographic and cinematic avant-garde, embracing fragmentary vision and multiple perspectives. In his "snapshots," just as he wrote of Robert Frank, everyday life is "experienced as a form of montage, as a set of disarticulated moments" (Campany 2003, 34). Notably, Campany often posts multiple images at once, producing visual puzzles that require a sideways scroll to reveal the connections between the images. Again, what he has written of other photographers engaging in image sequencing also applies to his own work: "it is a matter of images being given the chance to articulate each other" and that through series and sequences "[t]he straight image is made self-conscious and reflexive" in the dialogue between one picture to the next (Campany 2003, 33). This logic is certainly applicable to Campany and Samoylova's joint Instagram account, in which each photograph literally defers to and is dependent upon the one prior and the one to come.[10]
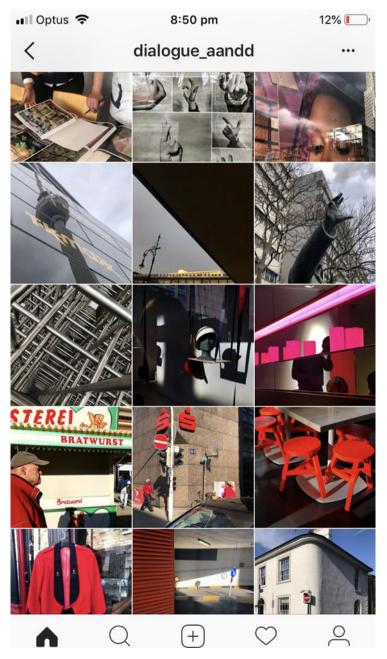
Figure 4. David Campany and Anastasia Samoylova, from the Instagram feed "@dialogue_aandd." Courtesy of the artists.
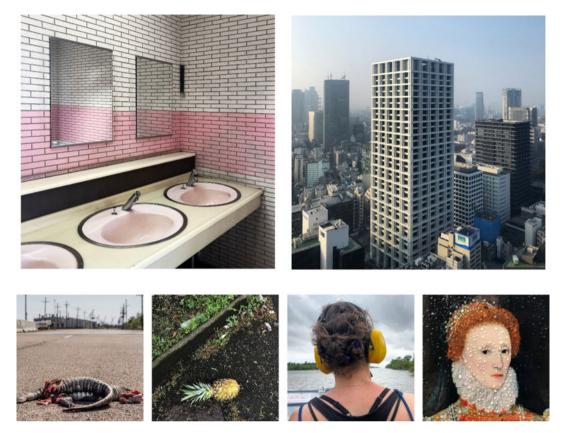
Figure 5. David Campany and Anastasia Samoylova, from *Dialogue* (2017–). Courtesy of the artists.

Dialogue is described on Campany's website as "a long, winding, unbroken sentence of observational pictures … exploring reflexively the visual grammar, syntax, resonances, and conventions of contemporary imagery, all with a heightened sense of place."[11] Samoylova refers to it as "a total free flow" and Campany notes that the work emerges out of the "in-between spaces" in their lives (YouTube 2019). Indeed, the images often seem to be the outcome of daily commutes, but although the diaristic nature of Instagram makes it personal at some level, the images rarely depict home or work-life explicitly. Instead, the work benefits from Campany and Samoylova's extensive travels, especially in Europe. At times their journeys coincide, as happens at the offices of the revered photography

book publisher Gerhard Steidl in Germany, while editing a book of Samoylova's work (*FloodZone*, an observational project responding to the problem of rising sea levels in Miami).

Scrolling through the grids on Instagram, theme and form become almost interchangeable. Between multiple reflections in car windows and Rodchenko-like urban studies in light, geometry, and perspective, sequences of images united by colors stand out. Pockets of bright red and yellow, in particular, link various groups of images. The "heightened sense of place" – presumably a reference to the difference between tropical Miami and grey London – gives way to generic European urban environments. Campany understands the project in part as an exploitation of the Instagram format and a liberation

from its conventions – against "grand statements" he sees as common on Instagram, in favor of "a constant exchange, where there is no final meaning, just a deferral of meaning to the next image" – and even at one point proposing that the "visual conversation" is "an attempt to drown the bad images of Instagram" (YouTube 2019). As he says, "the images are not made to be liked" by an audience. They are a response to another person's image, the outcome of an experimental process of going out into the world with someone else's image in mind. Dialogue arises from a consideration of another's perspective.

Dialogue has been exhibited in a physical form on two occasions. In Berlin in 2018, the pair produced small prints of some diptychs, triptychs, and quads of images and presented them flowing across the walls at different heights, together with a video slide-show. In 2019 the work was presented as part of an exhibition of phone camera work called "Smart as Photography," where images were printed as grids on four long rolls of photographic paper, pinned to a free-standing wall and curling at the bottom to suggest an endless stream of images. This was accompanied by a split-screen video projection, featuring all 3400 images, presented in strict alternation from left to right in a fast dissolve running over several hours, which could be entered at any point.[12] Like the curling paper, this slide-show format inevitably suggests excess, but also becomes an exploration of the dynamic between the still and moving image. It brings to mind Roland Barthes' well-known notion of the "filmic" in his essay "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills," by which he designates the content of film that cannot be described verbally, the "signifier without a signified" that "outplays meaning" (Barthes 1977a, 61–62). Barthes reaches for a comparison with the Japanese *haiku*, "a sort of gash raised of meaning (of desire for meaning)," whereby "the signifier (the third meaning) is not filled out, it keeps a permanent state of *depletion*" (62). In many respects this evokes the space between images in *Dialogue*, in which no photograph stands alone and each looks backward and forward to another.

Dialogue as symptom? The limits of photography as dialogue

I began this article by noting that the networking of photography has provided a new context for artist-led photo-dialogues. Photo-dialogues are thus a microcosm of a broader shift from photography as memory to a more immediate visual form of communication, and the peripatetic lifestyles of artists have pioneered new forms of transnational dialogue. Photography's ease of accumulation, the new speed of global transmission, and increasingly searchable image databases suit this new practice perfectly. Artist-led photo-dialogues are both a response to a potential and an attempt to develop a new form. And as we have seen, what unites most of the dialogues I have discussed in this article is a sense of self-reflectivity about the form. Participants in photo-dialogues play with formal conventions and expectations, reveling in unexpected patterns and interconnections between images. The "subject" of the "conversations," it seems, is often the medium of exchange itself. In particular, the dialogues seem to force a renewed reflection on photography's carving up of the visual world into discrete fragments. In a sense, these photo-dialogues attempt to make a virtue of Sontag's complaint that through photography "the world becomes a series of unrelated, freestanding particles" that operate as "inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy" (Sontag 1977, 17). Thus, the photo-dialogues I have discussed are characterized by artists taking turns to echo and invert figures, shapes, and colors between images. Motifs are taken up, only to be abandoned and replaced by new ones. As one critic nicely described the dialogues featured on *A New Nothing*, "compositional elements" are "mimicked repeatedly, until the original form dissolves, like an object fading into its own reflection between two mirrors" (Campbell 2017). The dialogues have no end point in mind, and indeed, despite the exhibition outcomes, there seems little indication of photo-dialogues

becoming more than a minor part of an artist's practice.

Artist-led photo-dialogues appear to be an implicit response to the excess and cacophony of disconnected, often "redundant" individual photographs online. Indeed, they also enable participating photographers to re-animate their own "redundant" archives as raw material in a fresh context, transforming the archive into an extended vocabulary of potential conversational responses. From the perspective of critical theory, the mini-montage effects in photo-dialogues could be accused of failing to move dialectically beyond the fragments of modernist experience towards a critical social position. Indeed, the photo-dialogues I have explored largely conform to a form of detached aestheticism. At the same time, photo-dialogues also represent a rejection of atomized, consumer-oriented communication in favor of more extended personal exchanges. The dialogues I have addressed by and large involve individuals who know one another (or otherwise became friends during the exchange). Nevertheless, there is a public quality to the exchange; most reveal little about the sender's actual lives; they are not overly intimate like much of the exchanges on social media. In a sense, the strict alternation of the image exchange is akin to that of letters politely sent between pen-pals. As early as 1863, in a prescient text, Oliver Wendell Holmes had already predicted the idea of two people exchanging photographs as a way to get to know each other, referring to such "photographic intimacy" as "a new form of friendship" (Holmes 1863, 15).[13] Trust, and a belief in reciprocity, are perhaps the fundamental requirements for any successful dialogue.

It may be tempting to account for the explosion of interest in photo-dialogues in terms of a questioning of singular authorial photographic perspectives on the world, now cast as "monological." Paradoxically, however, as we have seen, photo-dialogues can accentuate the "style" and subjectivity of the individual photographer:

> As subject matter and form are batted back and forth between two photographers, as if over a tennis net, stylistic choices take on a gestural quality. Because photographers get to choose whether to recognize, reject, or repeat elements in their partner's picture, their aesthetic inclinations look a bit like character traits … talking in pictures, like any sort of conversation, reveals the interlocutors' dispositions. (Campbell 2017)

Occasionally, dialogues point to the stubbornness of an individual style. And knowing an exchange of photographs will be presented in public, either on a website, on Instagram, or in an exhibition, ensures that the process is a performance of that style. However, the dialogues also reveal that photographic style is rarely coherent and easily imitated. If photography is a form of language – which is not to suggest it is universal – it is necessarily dialogical in the terms of early twentieth-century Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (even if, in Bakhtin's view [1990], photography's mechanical nature foreclosed such dialogue). From the perspective of dialogism, "every personal expression is always already a social experience, an interaction with the voice of the Other" (Polan 1981, 46). A photographer's vocabulary is made up of the vocabularies of others.

Since photo-dialogues are between artists, we should not be surprised that the viewer's role is secondary. From the viewer's perspective, not only are some of the dialogues difficult to follow – the connective tissue between the images impossible to unpick – some of the exchanges are willfully insular. Insider jokes and pictorial complexity are defensible on various levels, including as an antidote to self-promotional social media communication alluded to above. However, they also conform to the elitism of modern art, with its limited range of participants, privileging those who are already able to speak. None of the photo-dialogues I have discussed here involved a dialogue with viewers, or anyone else outside the two artists directly involved. This is perhaps an opening for future work by others. There is no reason a photo-dialogue could not involve three or more participants, even as the conversation might threaten to dissolve into noise. Photo-dialogues could even become a

pedagogical tool in visual education, and a vehicle for cross-cultural dialogue, across difference and with strangers. In short, photo-dialogues could become more dialogical, delivering on the promise of dialogue, that "through the process of exchange people may become more aware of their own views and expand their understanding of one another" (Sennett 2013, 19). Then we could begin to evaluate the success of the dialogue, as Grant Kester attempts to evaluate dialogical artwork, on the basis of the "condition and character of the dialogical exchange" (Kester 1999, 3). However, it is precisely this kind of dialogue that may not be possible, if photo-dialogues require a shared visual vocabulary and an internal motivation to work.

Finally, I have explored some of the challenges involved in presenting the dialogues to viewers. Beyond the original context, books are an obvious choice. In art museums, another technique is to select the most poetic sequences of the dialogue, as if highlighting the most effective lines of poetry. But the presentation of photo-dialogues in the form of a video slide-show seems most immanent to the format, even though turning individual photographs into regular, rhythmic dissolve imposes a fixed viewing time on each image, threatening the complexity of the "filmic" space between them. Dialogues are provisional by their nature, but the slide-show serves to *memorialize*. And in turn this raises another question: even as dates are rarely part of the final presentation, are photo-dialogues between artists also a simple attempt to introduce a sense of missing order – history – into the exchange of photographs online? As many writers have observed of social media, its focus is immediate communication: "interaction is transient and communicative, so the central role of memorialization is gone" (Miller 2016b, 8). For now, photo-dialogues remain in an experimental phase. No doubt other questions will be raised by new photo-dialogues in future years.

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Notes

1. Some of these precursors are exhibited in the exhibition "snap + share: transmitting photographs from mail art to social networks" at SFMOMA, 30 March–4 August 2019.

2. Marcelo Brodsky at Slought Foundation: "'Visual Correspondences', with Manel Esclusa, Pablo Ortiz Monasterio, Martin Parr, Cassio Vasconcellos, Marcelo Brodsky, Horst Hoheisel, Eduardo Cadava and Gabriela Nouzeilles (19 April 2011)" A recording is available at https://slought.org/resources/visual_correspondences.

3. In 2009, Parr made a related work with Joachim Schmid in which rather than an exchange of photographs, he exchanged his photographic identity at the behest of his friend Joachim Schmid. As Schmid recalls: "In September 2009 Martin Parr sent me his VIP pass to the Berlin Art Forum, that he had recently received. He thought nothing of this, as he was sending me something else anyway and knew full well he would be unable to attend. I saw this as an opportunity to visit the fair and take photos in the spirit of Martin Parr. I was to be Martin Parr for the 23rd September." The playful exchange of styles did not end there. "I then invited Martin to be Joachim Schmid, and he decided to trawl through the 'Martin Parr, We Love You' group on Flickr. This was established a few years ago as a forum for photographers who had been seemingly influenced by his photographic language. So in the spirit of Joachim Schmid, Martin looked for the most 'Parr-like' images. He then wrote to all the selected photographers and invited them to participate in this project, in exchange for a copy of the book." The result is a collaboratively authored set of images that look as if they have been taken by the two famous photographers. See the artist's promotion for the book *Joachim Schmid Is Martin Parr—Martin Parr Is Joachim Schmid* (2009) on his website: https://schmid.

wordpress.com/2009/11/29/new-books-6 (accessed 20 June 2015).

4. The workshop was led by youth facilitators Neena Pathak and Kate Mollison of Slought, who worked with students from South Philadelphia High School on a pedagogical project, also responding to images with other images.

5. As Nat Ward explains in an episode of the *Real Photo Show* podcast (episode 33): "One of the big conversations that Ben and I have always had and always kind of bristled against together is this idea … that all potential is exhausted in photography, and so there is this sense that there is nothing left for photography." https://soundcloud.com/thephotoshow/nat-ward-ben-alper-a-new-nothing-episode-33.

6. See https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2017/talking-pictures. Short slide-show videos of several of the visual "conversations" appear on the Met's website.

7. See www.instagram.com/dialogue_aandd/.

8. See https://www.fountainheadresidency.com/anastasia-samoylova.

9. Campany's books include *Photography and Cinema* (Reaktion Books, 2008) and *The Cinematic* (Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2007). In 2017 he co-curated *The Still Point of the Turning World: Between Film and Photography* for Fotomuseum Antwerp.

10. Campany effectively pre-theorized aspects of the *Dialogue* project in an essay for the Tate exhibition catalogue *Cruel and Tender* in 2003, in which he argued that the dialogue between images in the serial work of the Bechers generates "difference and repetition, comparison, contrast" and that "in number and sequence images can be made to modify and modulate each other in a critical and reflexive manner" (Campany 2003, 34).

11. See https://davidcampany.com/dialogue/.

12. The work was first shown at Galerie Andreas Schmidt in 2018. In February–March 2019, *Dialogue* was also part of "Smart as Photography – Be An Artist Today!", a group show looking at various art practices using the smart phone at ZEPHYR – Raum für Fotografie der Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen, Mannheim, Germany.

13. I am grateful to David Campany and Anastasia Samoylova for alerting me to this reference (YouTube 2019).

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