Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues

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Handbook of the ARTS in Qualitative Research

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Visual Art

PHOTOGRAPHS AND/AS SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY

◆ Claudia Mitchell and Susan Allnutt

Imagine a world without things. It would be not so much an empty world as a blurry, frictionless one: No sharp outlines would separate one part of the uniform plenum from another; there would be no resistance against which to stub a toe or test a theory or struggle stalwartly. Nor would there be anything to describe, or to explain, remark on, interpret, or complain about—just a kind of porridgy oneness. Without things, we would stop talking.

—Daston, 2004, p. 9

We are interested in some of the ways in which photographs talk. Working with photographs—both photographs *found* as in the case of the Elsie and Dolly project (C. Mitchell, 2005) and photographs *taken*

Author's Note: We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the Honors, Master's, and Doctoral students in several courses: Textual Approaches to Research, 2002 (McGill University); Cinematic, Documentary, and Television Texts, 2004 (University of KwaZulu-Natal); and Visual Methodologies and Social Change, 2005 (McGill University). We would also like to acknowledge our colleague Jean Stuart who co-taught the course at UKZN and who has been keenly interested in the work on photo documentary.

(as described elsewhere in the photo-voice[1] projects of Ewald, 1992, 1996, 2001; Lykes, 2001a, 2001b; C. Mitchell, Stuart, Moletsane, Delange, & Buthelezi, 2005; Wang 1999; Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004)—offers fascinating possibilities for engaging in what W. J. T. Mitchell (2004) describes as "a new materialism" in social science research. We take our title from Daston's work with things. Studying and producing photographs and photo albums, we can begin to get a sense of the power of photographs as objects and as things in social science research—and of their capacity for talk.

Clearly much has been done already on family albums, particularly in the area of the visual arts and art history. These studies range from work on one's own family album(s) (Faber, 2003; Kuhn, 1995; C. Mitchell & Weber, 1999; Spence, 1986; Spence & Holland, 1991; Weiser, 1993), to the work of Arbus (see Chalfen, 1987, 1991, 2002; Hirsch, 1997; Langford, 2000; Lee & Pultz, 2004; and Willis, 1994, to name only some of the scholars who examine other people's albums). These various album projects have highlighted the personal in looking at or working with one's own photographs, but there is also, as in the case of Langford (2000), the idea of explicitly looking at "other people's photo albums" through a sociocultural lens. The issues that they have explored range from questions of cultural identity and memory through to what Spence (1986) has described as "reconfiguring" the family album. In this chapter we extend these explorations into work on producing albums, focusing in particular on the ways in which the process of producing small photo documentaries helps to deepen an understanding of the power of photographs as objects. We start with an example of "showing" where Claudia narrates an account of working with a small collection of family photographs. We then go on to describe a series of photo album projects produced by a group of graduate students. These we draw on to highlight how photographs can exist as objects and as social documents in social science research.

◆ *What Dolly Sent Elsie: Photographs Found*

Claudia finds a collection of photographs sent to her mother Elsie as a young married woman in Manitoba, Canada, by Dolly, a young woman working in a milk top factory in York, England.

A set of snapshots and letters is exchanged by two young women, one from York, England, and the other from Gopher Creek, Manitoba, in Canada between 1938 and some time into the mid-1950s. The two women "meet" (at least through letters) when my mother Elsie, a farm woman working alongside her husband, Bill, on a dairy farm in the middle of Canada, opens up a box of milk bottle tops and finds the name and address of Dolly who works in the factory in York which produces the cardboard tops for milk bottles. Dolly, it seems, has put her name and address in the box; it is a version of the glass bottle with the message in it being flung into the sea. The farm woman, Elsie, finding the name and address, must have sent off a reply, though what she said we don't know—but so begins a correspondence that lasts for 20 years or more.

Dolly only really comes alive for me, however, after my mother's death about five years ago, when my two brothers and I find ourselves sorting photographs in the apartment Elsie moved into after my father died. Dolly manages to get herself into the burial night by appearing over and over again—in tiny black and white snapshots, in wallet-sized studio portraits of herself by the sea (Figure 21.1) or putting on make-up (Figure 21.2).

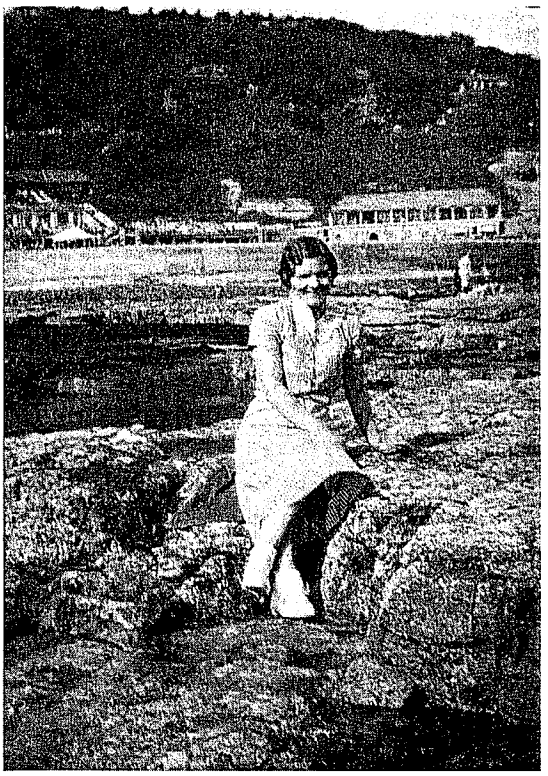

Figure 21.1

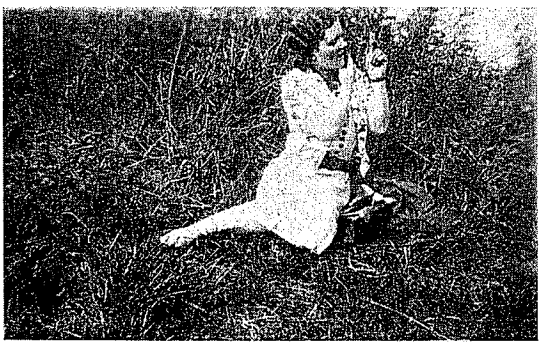

Figure 21.2

Dolly also becomes visible through her inscriptions on the backs of most of the snapshots; these are overlaid by Elsie's inscriptions as we see in Figure 21.3.

I know I must have missed some, but by the end of the evening I have a good 25 or more of these photos, photos which can be pieced together at least in a chronological way which documents Dolly by herself, Dolly with her fiancé, Dolly married, and Dolly with children as we see in the commercial "children on a donkey photo" (Figure 21.4).

All of this is, of course, very one sided and uni-dimensional. We are missing Elsie's photos to Dolly. We are also missing Dolly's letters to Elsie and Elsie's letters to Dolly. And then there are stories that are only implied by the photographs. In many of the Dolly-by-the-sea photos, for example, we are left wondering who actually took these photos. Who was Dolly posing for as she puts on her make-up? Why were Dolly's parents on holiday with her? But there is another set of questions about Elsie. What could Elsie have been thinking when she opened up that carton of bottle tops and discovered Dolly's name and address? Did she exclaim and show it to

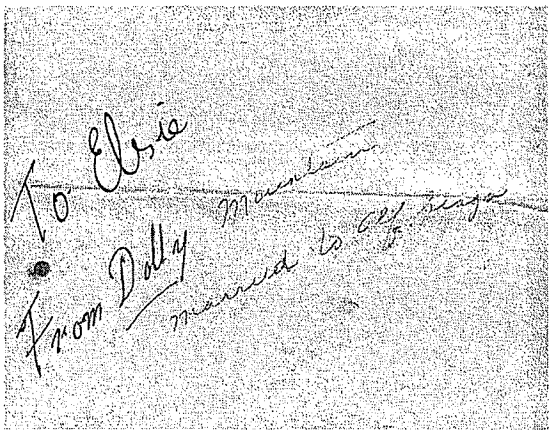

Figure 21.3

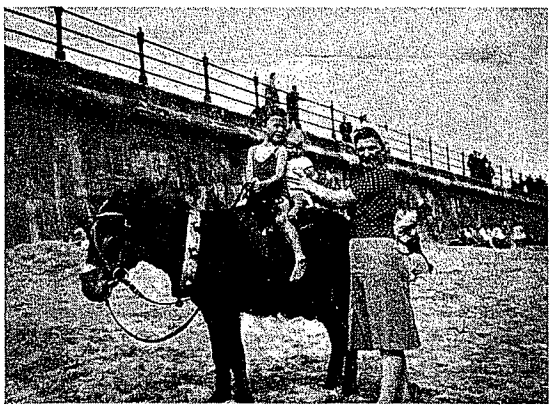

Figure 21.4

her mother-in-law or Bill her new husband or would they both think it frivolous? She had moved into their house, their farm—was this some way of keeping something for herself? How long did she wait before she responded? What did she write. . . ." I am living on this farm in the middle of nowhere and I am bored out of my mind, and I hate living with my mother-in-law." What if I set out to construct a photo documentary around Elsie's life using Dolly's photographs as the base? The photo genres of the day were quite well established, which is why people's albums from a particular era so often look so much alike; it is all about clothing, hair, photo-finishing, the normative poses, and so on. Take Dolly's photo where she is posed with "friends on the rocks" (Figure 21.5).

Elsie's photo with her sister and two friends is quite similar only instead of the sea as backdrop there is a prairie and the Pipestone Creek (Figure 21.6) *(C. Mitchell, 2005, p. 5)*[2].

Figure 21.5

Figure 21.6

◆ *Photo Albums and Documentary Studies*

What the Dolly–Elsie project sets up is a "frame" for studying the use of photo albums in social science research that we have taken up through the Centre for Visual Methodologies for Social Change at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the International Visual Methodologies Project at McGill University (www.ivmproject.ca).[3] These studies were organized around a class "photo documentary project." This endeavor was initially conceived of as a prelude to video documentary work and focuses on participants working on their own family albums.

The approach is quite simple:

- Find (not take) seven or eight photos that appear (to you) to be linked to some sort of theme or narrative.
- Organize the seven or eight photos into a small photo album.
- Provide a title, a short curatorial statement of 150–200 words, short captions with each photo, and acknowledgements (where appropriate).

- Contain each aspect of the text material (curatorial statement and captions) to what can be placed within an album window.

The themes that people address in these photo-album documentaries have been fascinating. Some are very personal and almost confessional, and others, although personal in the sense of representing the passion of the documentarian, have a broader social context. In a set of albums produced in South Africa, Tembinkosi (now also documented in a video *My Photos, My Video, My Story,* Mak, Mitchell, & Stuart, 2005) uses the album project to explore one of the stark realities of life in rural KwaZulu-Natal in the age of AIDS—death and dying, silences, and "the after life" (as in how the survivors deal with all of this). In this case, he documents the story of his sister who in her early 20s dies mysteriously, leaving behind her 6-year-old son to be raised by Tembinkosi and the grandmother. Tembinkosi uses the project to explore the silences, not just about the cause of his sister's death and the importance of naming the disease, but also the position of AIDS orphans—in this case, his young nephew. In Tembinkosi's "performing"[4] of the album when he presents it to the class, he offers the image of his mother falling asleep with the album under her arm. It is a poignant representation of what the album project means to his family in terms of breaking silences.

Then there is Grace, a Black teacher in her late 20s who, as the daughter of a domestic worker, is more or less adopted into the White family for whom her mother works. As Grace goes back through the family photos, she looks at the ways in which she is dressed the same as the little White girl in the family and the fact that they are sometimes given identical toys. The culminating event is her graduation photo—or is it? Grace's documentary is an interrogation of privilege—her own to a certain extent, but not without questioning. There is Bongani, whose photographs of his daughter (born in 1994), are organized around the theme of the "decade of democracy" babies, as they have come to be called. His documentary takes us up to 2004 and, like Grace's album, is not without questioning about a postapartheid South Africa. Is it better? How have the hopes of April 1994 for a new beginning been fulfilled? And which ones haven't?

One documentary study submitted as a final project in the Canadian class, which emerged from its photo-album beginning, was conceived by Ran Tao as an examination of Chinese women's contemporary history. Using only eight photographs of Ying, the mother of a friend of hers, she manages to chart not only an individual woman's life in China from the 1940s to the present but also the sweeping changes that have occurred in Chinese society during those years. Ran does this by identifying and culturally locating the dress and body manners in the photographs. These eight images show early 1940s pre-liberation, the People's Liberation Army era of the 1950s, the Cultural Revolution, the 1980s "spring comes to China," the 1990s and China's Open Door Policy, the beginning of the 21st century, and the opportunities of Ying's daughter, Yu, to travel to Canada. Though not a constructed photo-album project in the same way as those noted above, *Listening With Our Eyes: Ying's Photographic Memories and Chinese Women's Contemporary History* (Tao, 2005) emanated from a photo album. The shorthand of the photographs, excavated by the "reader" Ran with her implicit knowledge, and "transcribed" for us as Western viewers, makes instantly explicit the vast divides this woman (known to us only as Ying's mother) has traveled. These photographs, shown out of their family photo-album context, now act as an index of social change.

The titles of the documentaries and actual curatorial statements that participants include are also fascinating because they give the artist-narrators an opportunity to position themselves in the work. In fact we have come to think of them as another type of photo-voice, not that different from the work of Wendy Ewald and Caroline Wang. The curatorial statements as tightly worded, single-paged texts sit as aesthetic pieces unto themselves as do their titles: "Transmutations of a Girl"; "Country Folk, City Folk"; "Breaking the Silences: Sexual Abuse in Families"; "Methods for Felling a Tree"; "Through the Lens: The Changing Face of Canadian Classrooms"; "What Does Freedom Mean (to my Children)?"; "Class and Status Changes Through One's Life Time"; and "Generations."

◆ *Looking in on the Process*

What album projects offer are some intriguing questions about creating and viewing, about meaning and materiality and the way photographs can exist as objects and social documents in social science research.

1. PHOTO DOCUMENTARY AND METHOD

What the photo documentary project highlights is method: a set of practices for *doing*—and in particular, the significance of participatory process in working with photographs—and a set of practices around *engaging* with the thing that is produced. Several authors, but particularly the sociosemiotician Stephen Riggins (1994), offer useful ways of thinking about method in working with objects in the social sciences. Riggins looks at the denotative and connotative meanings of objects. Using the case of his parents' living room, he methodically photographs each object (starting at the door and ending up back at that door): the wall hangings, lamps, television set, easy chairs, and so on. For each object there is its denotative meaning (the first television set exhibited in the forties; the purchase of the particular television set), and then its connotative meaning, the stories of that particular television set, or the narration that accompanies it.

Riggins (1994) uses the term "mapping" to describe the ways in which objects serve as entry points for the telling of stories about the self. Of this mapping, he writes:

> meaning by this that the self uses the displayed objects (gift, heirlooms, photographs, etc.) as a way of plotting its social network, representing its cosmology and ideology, and projecting its history onto the world's map, its spatial spread so to speak. (p. 109)

The taking of the photographs is central to the process of visual ethnography:

> Many of the subtleties of domestic artifacts will elude the researcher unless it is possible to closely examine photographs. Consequently each room must be thoroughly photographed. Unlike the practice followed by the professional photographers employed by decorating and architectural magazines of removing all ephemeral traces left by users and inhabitants in order to avoid dating the photographs, ethnographers should make an effort to include the permanent as well as the ephemeral. Both are relevant to the research. (p. 110)

In *Researching Children's Popular Culture,* C. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) draw heavily on Riggins to read children's bedrooms. But in the context we are describing here, we see how this work can be applied to producing albums. In the case of photo documentary, there is the process of locating and

selecting the photographs, followed by producing "the thing" of the album. Many family albums, as Langford (2000) and others have pointed out, have a "keeper," a person who is responsible for organizing and arranging, adding transcriptions, dating, and so on. Denotatively, the albums in the project can reflect this same tradition. Connotatively, though, in their making, they conjure up stories based on "looking for" and "looking at." Indeed, many of the students with whom we have worked comment on how doing this assignment becomes a family affair. Several of the students have had to direct their families in some other city to locate and send specific photos that they want to use in the album. Another student speaks of the time she spent with her parents going back through a set of school pictures. In fact, it is her mother who helps her decide on the theme. In this regard, the photographs both "are" and "do."

2. *HOW WE LOOK/ HOW WE LOOK AT*

Richard Chalfen (2002) discusses the phrase "how they looked" in his exploration of home media. He suggests that the domestic snapshot is more concerned with how we look than how we *look at.* More specifically in the usual creating/looking of a family photo album, the focal point would be on the familial, on relationship, on dress, hair . . . how we looked. As Chalfen says, "Family members are much *less* likely to make evidentiary claims for how they looked *at* their lives than how they appeared *to* people in their lives" (p. 143). Social scientists on the other hand bring a different perspective; they seek the "social and cultural practices and processes" (p. 143) embedded in the snapshots. Although Daniel Miller (1998) suggests that objects are mute and thus it is important to obtain ethnographic information, Chalfen (1991) notes the feedback function of photographs—how they act as a form of communication. The photo album projects take advantage simultaneously of both the muteness and the communicative aspects of photographs, and speak to the "social biography" of the album (see Edwards, 2002, and number 3 of this chapter).

Chalfen (2002) suggests there may be resistance to being "critical viewers of our own family pictures. . . . People may experience a kind of security in not having to treat their own snapshot collections as problematic" (p. 144). None of the students appeared to have a problem with this; they were, however, not problematizing their families in this exercise, but rather charting social transitions or change by identifying shifts in material objects, dress, and so on. One exception to this was the narrative identification of a family recently fragmented by incest and sexual abuse. This photo album was an example of the dissonance Hirsch (1997) talks about in her discussion of the domestic photos of Holocaust survivors. The photos themselves speak of family. The context, into which we as viewers/readers must put our imagination, is one of abuse and destruction. This particular project speaks of social change in and of itself; it carries what is not seen—the invisible trauma. But the mere telling of this "domestic" story in the context of social change shows the distance from the historically invisible "not spoken" to the possibility now of the invisible being spoken. The bridging of the distance between the personal and the societal, through this participant's photo-album project, appears to have been an empowering experience for her; there was in addition a forceful impact on the viewers of this album.

3. *PERFORMANCE*

Elizabeth Edwards (2002) puts forward the idea of performance in talking about the materiality of photos. Our experience

of photographs, she observes, is situated in space and time and mediated by the presentational format and the context of looking. Thus, the photograph, in and of itself, carries meaning prior to even considering the content of the image. Edwards and Hart (2004) highlight this with Roland Barthes' (1984) famous description of a photograph, which is first and foremost about the materiality of the object and only then includes a reference to the actual image:

> The photograph was very old, the corners were blunted from having been pasted in an album, the sepia 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. (p. 67)

Edwards (2002) suggests that we need to address this materiality, which has not been forefronted in visual studies' concentration on the semiotic and representational aspects of the photograph. Materiality is "closely related to social biography," as Edwards says, and any object "should be understood as belonging in a continuing process of meaning, production, exchange and usage" (p. 68). The participants in the two album projects noted above presented their album projects to each other. Having the participants "perform" the album project (and at the very beginning of the class prior to the delivery of theoretical standpoints) moves them to a different place very quickly. As Hirsch (1997) says, "to step into the visual is not to engage in theory as systematic explanation of a set of facts, but to practice theory, to make theory just as the photographer materially makes an image" (p. 15). Interestingly, many of the participants in the photo-album projects found this new perspective on their domestic photos, admittedly in an academic situation, to be challenging, freeing, and expansive. It pointed them to their own backyard—an often overlooked source of material. They understood that "kitchen studies" (C. Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002) can reduce some ethical concerns.[5] It freed them to think differently about their own lives—in a compact yet concrete manner.

The photo albums document what stretching the family photo album can bring to the surface. Hirsch (1997) speaks of how the family photo is a naturalization of cultural practices that thus disguises "their stereotyped and coded characteristics" (p. 7). Doing this form of photo-album creation takes the family photo out of its context and forces the participants to move out of the familial, personal genre to acknowledge the cultural practices embedded there, to identify change through objects and rituals (ritualizations) present in the photos. It is a representation of a point of view, demanding a stepping back, a stepping away. This project makes visible what Hirsch calls "private, familiar and virtually invisible" (p. 10) aspects of family photos, bringing them into the wider social context in which they were taken, preserved, and viewed.

4. PHOTO DOCUMENTARY AS VOICE IN SOCIAL CHANGE

Photo-voice, as Ewald (1996, 2001), Hubbard (1994), Lykes (2001a, 2001b), C. Mitchell et al. (2005), Stuart (2004), Wang (1999), and Wang et al. (2004) have noted, relies on giving research participants cameras to document their own lives. The actual "prompt" can vary from something very specific, even initiated by the researcher (e.g., taking photographs of problems and solutions in addressing HIV and AIDS, taking photographs of safe and not so safe places in school), to a more open-ended type of self-representation as in the case of Wendy Ewald's work with children. What is interesting, we

think, is to look at the photo-album projects noted above as a type of "voicing" project as well. The photographs we choose and the process of putting them into a documentary album serve to give voice.

Interestingly, many of the teachers with whom we have worked who have engaged in photo-album projects using "found" photos have often gone on to create with their own students albums that are based on the photos that children themselves take. In one school in rural South Africa, for example, a teacher who has acknowledged that most of her learners are too poor to have many photographs to engage in such a project, much less purchase an album to put them in, nonetheless adapts the pedagogical intervention by making little albums for each student out of four or five A4 sheets of paper stapled together. Children who don't have photographs draw their own pictures. The children produce drawings that look like posed photographs. In another school, Lindiwe decides to do an adaptation by having children become photographers first. Each of the first-grade students looks through the lens of a camera and carefully composes a picture that he or she describes to the teacher. The camera, though, as Lindiwe points out, has no film. There is no money for film or developing, but the idea of framing and "a gaze" is there and a story is still told.

This stands in contrast to a photo-voice/photo-album project done by a Canadian course participant and teacher in which each of her Grade 6 students had his or her own disposable camera to take photos of their view of the transition from elementary to secondary school. They then created photo albums with titles and brief curatorial statements. The identical photo albums made by the children with the assistance of their teacher were small-format albums, about 5 in. by 7 in., with a black cover and photos mounted on black pages, professionally coil-bound. Elegant and compact, they were presented by the teacher as her final class project, lined up in a plastic box. We don't have access to the children's perceptions of their projects, only the teacher's view of the process. But it would be interesting to discuss the differences in perceptions of the students in this Canadian project and those of the students in the South African project. Is the idea of framing "universal"? Is the camera an extension of the eye, when the camera is not known? Here we are reminded of Sarah Pink's (2001) story about Tomas, a man of Guinea Bissau, who didn't recognize himself in a playback seen in the viewfinder of the video camera, even though he had seen television in a different context.

5. PHOTO DOCUMENTARY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

"Can the visual arts make a difference?" asks Marilyn Martin (2004) in relation to addressing HIV and AIDS in South Africa, highlighting the ways in which various artists and art projects (including artistic interventions, memory quilts, and memory boxes) have contributed to AIDS activism and engagement. In this regard photographs might be read as documents (Hodder, 1997) and, as such, representative of change. He is referring to a range of documents, including historical writings, but we might also look at photographs and other objects as documents and thus as representational agents of change. A good example can be seen in the work of Susan Schwartzenberg (2005) when she combines photos, documents, children, and disability. Her multilayered documentation looks at children and disability in Seattle over 40 years, using material from family photo albums and linking it with other historical records. In doing this work, she connects the domestic photo album expressly to its temporal and geographical

as well as geopolitical locations. Understanding the multilayered ways in which social change can occur lays bare any idea that revolution/evolution is or can be straightforward. The iterative nature of social change, spiraling up, down, and across social spheres, in time and place, reminds us of the structural nature of our cultures, no matter how naturalized geopolitics wants us to believe them to be. Schwartzenberg (2005) says of the stories of change she documented on disability, that through them, she "saw a matrix of ideas flooding society during the past century" (p. 80). Charting change in this way reminds us of the possibility of change and is a concise history lesson in empowerment. In the case of Tembinkosi's album, noted above, and the image of his mother falling asleep with the album under her arm, it is difficult to resist the idea of "the power of objects" both to study change and to bring about change.

6. PHOTO DOCUMENTARY AND IMAGINATION

Finally, we return to the idea of things and the imagination in the social sciences. Looking to Annette Kuhn (1995), it is hard to avoid the imaginative potential of this kind of research. Writing that uses photography as a central metaphor can contribute to our understanding of the power of both the object of the photograph and its connotative meanings (Lively, 2003; Modjeska, 1990; Oakley, 1996). One might also think about the imaginative potential of contesting "what was" or "what is" and to suggest "what could be." Jo Spence and Rosy Martin (Spence, 1995) engaged in staged photography wherein they "re-took" the kinds of photographs that they thought should have been taken of them as schoolgirls, or which would provide for an embodied investigation of issues of school and the expectations of working-class parents. In an imaginative study of "what Dolly sent Elsie," it may be possible to reconfigure the family album to create the kinds of photos Elsie and Dolly might have wanted to exchange as opposed to the socially sanctioned photos of birthdays and holidays: images of Elsie "stepping out" beyond the world of the farm, perhaps packing to go on a romantic Shirley Valentine holiday to England, or having Dolly and Elsie reenact their work sites (Valerie Walkerdine, personal communication, November 10, 2005).

◆ *Conclusion*

In this chapter we have attempted to locate work on objects and things within the field of visual studies more generally. Each has its well-established literatures as we see in the work of Brown (1998), Haworth-Booth (2004), and Miller (1998), for example, on things and material culture, and the vast range of research on working with photographs within visual studies (e.g., Banks, 1998, 2001; Higonnet, 1998; Knowles & Sweetman, 2004). Here we simply wish to see how these works, taken together, can deepen an understanding of the perspectives of participants on a particular phenomenon and at the same time engage participants more actively in the process of both researching their own lives and offering "ways forward." In a photo project with young people in South Africa on addressing issues of stigma in relation to HIV and AIDS, many of the participants spontaneously play with the idea of staging as part of representation (Moletsane et al., 2005). One of the most poignant staged images is of a 16-year-old boy with a noose around his neck. As difficult as it is to look at it, the photo is one that "matches" one set of scenarios for young people in South Africa

where the prevalence rates for HIV infection are high and where there is the association that (unprotected) sex = death. Studying and exploring both the materiality of the photograph and the image itself suggests, we think, new possibilities for creating images of hope rather than despair and, in so doing, suggests a place for photographs as things and as objects in the process of social change. Although this is not an area that has been foregrounded in the work on objects and things in visual studies more generally, mapping out a variety of visual methods can suggest pathways for change. In this way we think that this "new materialism" offers pathways for hope.

◆ Notes

1. Well elaborated by Caroline Wang and Mary Brinton Lykes, among others, photo-voice is a method that "is based on the understanding that people are experts in their own lives" (Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004) and uses photography as a tool for both individual empowerment and broader social change (see number 4 in this chapter).

2. A version of the section "What Dolly Sent Elsie" was first presented by Claudia Mitchell as part of a keynote address at the Annual Conference of the Literacy Researchers of Canada, Canadian Society for Studies in Education, May 27, 2005. A version of this paper was also presented at the International Visual Sociology Association Conference by Susann Allnutt, Claudia Mitchell, and Jean Stuart (2005). The "What Dolly Sent Elsie" component of the paper was later expanded by Claudia into a talk at the Power of Objects Seminar Series, Cardiff University, November 10, 2005.

3. For further information about the Centre for Visual Methodologies for Social Change and the International Visual Methodologies Project, see www.ivmproject.ca

4. Edwards (2002) says "photography is not merely the instrument of indexical inscription, it is technology for visual display experienced as meaningful" (p. 67). Thus, the display of the albums becomes a performance of meaning, which is understood as such by the other participants in the class.

5. It raises other ethical concerns, however, not the least of which is positioning as "other" those with whom you are intimate.

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