Volume 3, Issue 2 (Autumn/Winter 2020)

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Keywords: Home, after ethnos, visual essay, photography, imagination

Recommended Citation:

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At Home After Ethnos: A visual essay

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In March 2020, I left Madrid with a sense of dread and despair. Although I had another week of activities planned, the imminent lockdown in Spain and the uncertainty of the growing situation with Covid-19 forced me to change my ticket for a sooner date. The day before my flight, I had a walk with two dear friends in the Madrid Rio Park (one of them was one of the editors of this special issue). While enjoying the stroll, with dozens of people, police in their cars warned everyone that they should leave the public space and go home. Using a megaphone, they announced “this is a matter of public health”. People at the time still felt the virus was too distant. It was not. Several thousand people will die in Spain in the coming weeks, and a million around the world at the moment of this writing.

The next day I rushed to the airport to catch the next available flight to Australia. The metro was eerily empty for a Saturday evening. An empty subway in one of the busiest cities in the world. I arrived at a semi deserted Barajas airport, the shops were all closed and all the people boarding the few available planes were in a state of desperation and uncertainty. Most of us wanting to go home without a clear idea of what was coming. I landed in Sydney 27 hours later and that was the beginning of a 14 days lockdown, the first of two I have experienced so far. When I left Australia for Europe, Covid-19 was a virus affecting a region in China, when I came back, it was a world pandemic disease.
I arrived at my place, physically and mentally exhausted but happy to be home. Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your stuff, alone in a two-room flat, while the entire world as you know it disappears out of sight. Imagine further that you are a beginner, without previous experience in pandemics, with nothing to guide you and no one to help you. During the lockdowns, I had periods of despondency, when I buried myself in the reading of books, as a man (or a woman) might take to drink in a fit of (sub)tropical depression and boredom.

At my return, my home became my office, my library, my café, my restaurant, my cinema, my gym; my only place. For millions around the world, the space where they lived, their home, became their whole world. But not only the space had changed, the speed of time was also different. Simultaneously running faster and slower. We have been very fortunate (so far) in New South Wales, the state where I live in Australia. While we had a “mild lockdown”, we were always able to have a walk in the park or the beach, do grocery shopping and even meet with friends, in certain numbers and complying with certain conditions. I have, nevertheless, been working from home for the last nine months. All my teaching, all my meetings, and most of my social life have been at home where I spend most of my time during the week. And the more I spend time at home, the stranger it seems to me.

This photo essay is my encounter, for the first time, with the strangeness of my own home, in the broader meaning of the word (a house, a country and a world). The virus changed my notion of home while making the world disappear out of its walls, emptying if from people. This visual essay explores what a home/world without humans can be.

**Practicing photography as an innovative anthropological inquiry**

In the past year, I have even changed the direction of my research in two ways, by developing a method that uses photography to trigger the (anthro/sociological) imagination — instead of using it as a representation— and by actively intervening into issues regarding the current climate crisis. This combination has led me to imagining a world without humans through images. While humans are nowhere to be seen, they are at the centre of the questions that guide these images, practicing a visually-oriented *After Ethnos* Anthropology (see Rees 2018). Tobias Rees, in his interesting book suggests that: “the promise of research—its beauty—is the possibility that something one has thus far regarded as obvious—as so obvious that one could not possibly be aware of it—suddenly appears as problematic” (2018: 45). While this is not the place to expand on his ideas in detail, Rees proposes an anthropology “of” the human / after “the human”. This anthropology, he continues, has “quite literally to be, research into the open” (p. 59). He suggests that this anthropology is “interested in how instances in the here and now escape the human and open up previously unknown possibilities of thought” (p. 68). And therefore, he proposes a decoupling of anthropology from ethnography.

Taking his ideas as an inspiration, and expanding them beyond anthropology as a discipline, I want to reflect visually on what a world without humans would look like. In my tiny apartment, my home, my entire physical world for weeks, I started exploring this vision, a post-ethnography of sorts. Or, perhaps more accurately, a visual anthropology that was not ethnographic. These photos are presented as visions in its three
meanings; as an idea, as imagination, and as an ability to see. This use of the images can potentially expand the traditional use of images as representations, contributing besides, to a necessary (and exciting) discussion between social sciences and art (see Borea 2017; Wright and Schneider 2010; Schneider and Wright 2020).

This essay builds upon my previous photographic explorations articulated as traces, inventories, and trajectories (Gómez Cruz 2020; 2016). All these examinations problematise the idea of images as representations by thinking seriously about the use of images as a way to trigger the imagination (Gómez Cruz 2019). In this particular case, my focus was on time and space, interrogating the idea of a home where humans are nowhere to be seen but its presence is nevertheless evident everywhere. All the photos were taken at night and without direct light. The light is provided by the moon, public lighting, neighbours’ lights or a light in a different room of the flat. Every shot took between 3 and 10 seconds to be completed and I didn’t use a tripod. Therefore, there are two key elements photographed in the series; First, the spaces and corners of a home that is simultaneously emptied and lived. The second element is time. While we think of a home as a place, these images open a question of a home as a mere textured light. These images show not only corners and objects in an inhabited home deserted of people: they represent time responding to another element in Rees’s thinking, that anthropology has changed from the study of spaces to the study of time. For these images to be rendered visible, time needs to allow light to be reflected in the photographed spaces. In other words, these spaces, with time, can be seen, quite literally, in a new light.

Elizabeth Edwards suggests that in order for photography to become a contribution to anthropology, the qualities that are peculiar to the medium should be harnessed and “anthropology must look beyond the disciplinary edges and reposition its practice within a wider photographic discourse” (Edwards 1997: 53). I suggest therefore to use photography as a project for anthropology and not only for ethnography since “photography can be used as a visual metaphor which bridges that space between the visible and the invisible, which communicates not through the realist paradigm but through a lyrical expressiveness” (p. 58).

Connecting with the idea of an anthropology After Ethnos and responding to Rees’ invitation for an anthropology “as fundamentally a practice of poetry. If not in terms of form then at least in terms of the sensibilities it object demands” (Rees 2018: 140). Finally, while the frame of this series has been anthropology, particularly engaging with Rees’ ideas, this “kind of poetry” and visual sensibilities seem a fertile ground for exploration in other disciplines, from sociology to geography, from communication studies to education, this essay presents a visual contribution to continue this conversation.
Notes
1. This is, of course, a rip off of Malinowski’s famous paragraph describing his arrival at his fieldsite in Argonauts of the western Pacific.
2. A similar point raised by Tim Ingold (2017). Rees, nevertheless, has a different approach and moves in a different direction.
3. I want to thank Adolfo Estalella for suggesting this particular framing.

References:


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