

The Death of the Page: Image-driven Scholarship, Image Ethics, and Rethinking Publishing Futures

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Photographs of wolves, stones, people, and cartographic projections moved across whiteboards this summer. At a workshop hosted by the University of Leiden and the TRACTS research network,¹ graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and early-career scholars from all over Europe repositioned, cut, wove together, and hung from the ceiling images from their visual research projects. Organized by our Co-EIC, Lee Douglas, the “Archival Images” photo essay workshop was designed to explore multimodal engagements with archives and the images, documents, and objects they contain. Together with our colleagues and fellow editors Craig Campbell and Mark Westmoreland from the Writing with Light Editorial and Curatorial Collective, the intensive two-day event provided space for image-making researchers—as well as artists who research—to transform photo essay prototypes into finalized works, where questions of image, sequence, and form pushed participants to reimagine the page and its limits.

Set up as a crit review, an art school practice where small groups of peers gather together to provide feedback in an open and generous manner, the workshop created space for participants and facilitators to explore more collaborative and dialogic forms of peer review and critique. Through these engagements, participants pushed their multimodal work forward, refining their photo essays aesthetically, conceptually, and even ethnographically. We, Lee Douglas and Darcie DeAngelo, were inspired by these projects and could not wait for new works to be submitted to *Visual Anthropology Review*. We knew that the participants could take advantage of the opportunity presented by our publication's Page feature, which allows authors to think with layout, to experiment with the relationship between image and text, and to propose image-driven scholarship. The Page feature does not approach the visual as something supplementary or illustrative, but rather as inherent to nuanced argument. Few and far between opportunities for this type of visual scholarship exist in anthropology and we were happy we could hold space for cutting edge projects. Given the shifting academic publication landscape, we were also excited to see how new forms of critique and collaboration could catalyze the transformation of ideas into powerful stand-alone works.

Imagine our surprise when several weeks later, we were informed that Wiley, the publisher of the AAA journal portfolio, would be enforcing a standardized visual format that would eliminate the Page as it exists in journal issues 36.1–39.1. We are

still in conversation with Wiley and the AAA to find alternatives that may allow the Page to continue in some form. However, such workarounds will add to already overburdened workloads, reinforcing existing problematics regarding academic labor and its outsourcing. It also means that the Page will always be out of place with the standardized journal format that will frame future *VAR* articles. This forced standardization chisels away the recent groundbreaking *VAR* redesign spearheaded by former Co-Editors-in-Chief Stephanie Sadre-Orafai and Fiona McDonald. An innovative, indeed, radical move that transformed this publication into a site for thinking with and through layout and visual presentation, the redesign made it possible for visual anthropologists to publish work that not only analyzed image worlds but that also embraced visual practice and multimodal experiments as powerful arenas for producing new forms of (anthropological) knowledge. In contrast, the proposed standardization treats images in ways analogous to the publication of illustrative figures in most other peer-reviewed journals. The loss of the redesign is the death of the Page and, thus, the elimination of an important public arena for supporting and showcasing image-driven scholarship in ways that situate this work as a legitimate and important form of intellectual engagement.

This surprise parallels another change surreptitiously foisted upon the journal. In the spring of this year, an author notified us that their research article's embedded videos were downloadable to any reader who can access our publication. The same is true for photographs and other illustrations. This means that all images, videos, and audiovisual work published by Wiley are downloadable in high-res, editable form. In our conversations with Wiley and the AAA, this move has been described as a sector-wide adaptation that purportedly served to facilitate heightened access to and circulation of scholarship during the pandemic. While we recognize that publishing images in the digital ecosystem inevitably relinquishes some control over how images circulate and move, this unannounced shift poses serious ethical concerns. As a journal that showcases multi-modal scholarship, we are committed to the ethical obligations that anthropologists have with their interlocutors, especially with regard to the articulation and negotiation of informed consent, whereby ethnographic subjects have a say in how they are photographed and recorded and how such images are publicly circulated. Indeed, this is the very crux of image-driven anthropological work: its dedication to thinking and rethinking image ethics in ways that recognize the changing power dynamics and complex ethical, political landscapes that serve as a backdrop to an always shifting digital world. This is a world that will inevitably face new thorny ethical conundrums with ongoing and future developments in AI. *VAR* is committed to the artists, anthropologists, and image-makers who are producing work that contributes to

ongoing debates in our fields. For our authors, many of whom showcase their work in festivals, exhibitions or via curatorial projects and/or engage with intimate or sensitive images from interlocutors' personal collections, losing control over how images are made publicly available is a loss of editorial and authorial decision-making regarding how their work moves. It also affects how their collaborative work develops. In summary, the very reflexive ethics and forms of practice that visual anthropology has long been concerned with are, in some ways, being swiftly undone.

These unannounced and sudden changes have happened with little feedback from editors and authors and represent troubling dynamics in academic publishing. Perhaps more importantly, the inability to generate alternative options due to an increasingly inflexible publishing model means that this publication, together with its editors, is unable to imagine and enact solutions. This resonates with discussions, like those had by the VAR editorial team and the editors of the newly minted *Writing with Light Magazine* at the 2022 AAA Annual Meetings in Seattle, that have questioned academic publishing's dependence on a community whose members are largely precariously employed and on a publishing industry that outsources layout and production to places like South Asia. In many ways, these issues are at the center of ongoing debates regarding the future of the AAA portfolio. In his *Ethos* editorial, Greg Downey has recently explained how this precarization and outsourcing of publishing labor devalues editorial work and incentivizes editors to continue a chain of exploitation. Reflecting on his own experience, he writes "Editors were implicitly expected to either do it themselves or find some way to shift the labor onto volunteers or student assistants. For an editor employed at a prestigious, wealthy university, with colleagues working in the same subfield and a pool of highly skilled graduate students at their disposal, perhaps this was viable, although these arrangements are precisely the type of exploitative, 'work-for-prestige' or 'work-for-vague-future-support' relationships that facilitated abuse at HAU (Downey [2023](#), 6)." In describing recent events as well as the new expectations being put on journal editors, Downey illuminates how academic service labor has at once been devalued and increased by shifts in the publishing industry. However, he also calls for new forms of solidarity, which are already afoot as editors, especially those committed to smaller section journals like *VAR*, *Museum Anthropology*, *Transforming Anthropology*, *Feminist Anthropology*, gather together to express concerns regarding precarity and the loss of editorial and authorial control over publications. It is significant that many journals are finding ways to produce peer-reviewed work beyond Wiley sanctioned spaces, using websites, magazines, and other digital and analog outlets to showcase scholarship. Even though these

peer-reviewed publications do not get the distribution advantages that Wiley can offer through its library subscriptions, they produce important ethnographic insights. They also pose an important question: how might we reinvent our publishing landscape to support and benefit this type image-driven scholarship, a form of intellectual and conceptual labor which pushes our discipline forward.

Concurrently, groups of scholars are pushing the envelope with design-oriented and image-driven publishing initiatives that present alternatives to submitting work to flagship academic journals. Anne Pasek, an assistant Professor in the Department of Cultural Studies and the School of the Environment at Trent University and the [Canada Research Chair](#) in Media, Culture, and the Environment, has jumpstarted a new initiative, DIY Methods. This platform features “zine-based conferencing” where participants mail physical zines of their papers to conference organizers who distribute the zines among participants. Facilitating other forms of connection and exchange, DIY Methods reinvests scholarship with forms of dialogue and care that foster reflection and creative thinking. Similarly, the Society for Visual Anthropology's Board has worked toward more graphic-oriented publications and other events that showcase similar forms of invention. The recent creation of The Collective for Multimodal Makers, Publishers, Collaborators, and Teachers (CoMMPCT)—spearheaded by anthropologists Nat Nesvaderani, Stephanie Sadre-Orafai, and Gabriela Zamorano Villarreal—reinforces a collective commitment “to creating spaces to discuss less visible elements of making, publishing, collaborating, and teaching visual and multimodal anthropologies and collecting shared wisdom and experiences.” CoMMPCT curates online repositories for multimodal works such as zines, soundscapes, and other print and non-print media. The trick is, as always, figuring out how to get these important non-textual, media pieces to “count” professionally in the same way that peer-reviewed publications do. The Society for Visual Anthropology is working hard to ensure that anthropologists can push themselves creatively and still receive the merits they need despite their “unruly” subdiscipline (Ginsburg [2010](#)). With the Page, VAR offered such a space where image-driven multimodal scholarship could harness the legitimacy provided by peer review. In this sense, the almost certain death of the Page is an important loss that deserves reflection and action.

We do not say this lightly. We recognize that other projects that have pushed anthropology toward image-driven work and multimodality—including, the 10-issue journal *Limn*, Writing with Lights' collaboration with *Cultural Anthropology*, the inclusion of the Multimodal Anthropologies Editorial Collective in *American Anthropologist*, and even VAR's Page feature—demand more unpaid hours that are

often and unfortunately devalued in the hierarchy of peer review-based merit scores found in most academic rewards. In fact, more often than not, these creative initiatives end up being short-lived because of these very demands. Projects that have managed to ride the wave and reinvent themselves, like *Writing with Light Magazine*, often do so via the efforts of those scholars and makers capable of dedicating their time and resources. This, of course, is not always possible with the increasing precarity that envelops scholarly production. Regardless, multimodal anthropologists still produce these labors of love. In doing so they foment, share, and circulate some of the most translational skill sets that anthropologists can have in the current job market. They make it possible for students and academics to transfer image-making and visual literacy skills to forms of applied research, to data visualization, and User Experience Design. As tech companies begin to value anthropologists' abilities and potential, it seems imperative to recognize how what we teach and what we do might also be applicable beyond the ivory tower. Both academic and nonacademic markets uphold neoliberal values. In a community of anthropologists who must contend with increasing employment precarities, the publishing futures of academia foretell mismatches between divergent career paths: one which bases itself on peer-reviewed merits and another which celebrates good visual design. Neither path allows for the kind of critical image-driven work we were able to facilitate among makers at the photo essay workshop in Leiden. Those who think and work with images and other kinds of creative media are at the heart of this conundrum. As always, they will find ways to continue this work. Perhaps the question is: will we?

Our hope, of course, is that we will. We want anthropologists working in academia to be part of this conversation. We believe that actively imagining alternative futures is also a commitment to further exploring the complex ethical questions that arise when working with, producing, and circulating image-driven scholarship. In fact, we assert that the freedom to grapple with the complexity of image ethics in a rapidly changing digital ecosystem is one generative way to imagine an anthropology otherwise. It is also, we believe, one of the few pathways that may allow us to actualize publishing futures. In doing so, we will continue to ask our discipline—and those in conversation with it—to foment more equitable, radical, and sustainable forms of producing scholarship. Our scholarship needs to address not only the crisis that is here, but also those firmly situated in our collective horizon. We hold on tight to image ethics, to the questions they pose, and to the affordances they provide when reimagining what it is that anthropologists do, what conversations they may have, and the contributions that they may make.

This brings us to our current *VAR* issue, 39.2, the last of the redesign. The spring will bring forth a staid replacement with columns that match the rest of the AAA portfolio and most journals under Wiley's purview. As such, we are pleased that our authors in this issue counter this impending standardization. For example, our special section "Anthropology of the Artificial: Material Encounters among Humans and Sentient Machines" draws from artists like r e a, Lily Hibberd, and Saadia Mirza and their collaborations with anthropologists engaged with analyzing the material encounters between humans and sentient machines. Curated by Chris Salter and Alexandre Saunier, the special section contains research articles that engage with AI, new media technologies, and their implications for research in anthropology. Our Fall issue also includes four research issues that examine a wide range of pressing issues and the role of the visual in addressing them and, at times, reimagining answers to them. Sonay Ban grapples with regimes of film censorship in order to unpack the implications of suppressed cultural production in Turkey. Working in a different cultural context, Nat Nesvaderani explores the implications of Making Home, a participatory audiovisual media project with migrant refugee youth in Iran. By unpacking off-screen encounters with the pedagogy of film production, they argue that space and place are realized through the embodied experience of production filmic work about home. Scholar Rafael Capó explores how public monuments in Puerto Rico reaffirm complex imaginaries regarding the harmonious nature of cultural and racial miscegenation or *mestizaje*. Through a careful visual analysis of monuments and their engagement with national symbols, Capó describes how shared ideas regarding Puerto Rican identity are linked to visual discourses that privilege some cultural and racial "roots" over others, thus complicating simplified narratives regarding racial democracy in this Caribbean context. Finally, Theodor Richard and Hui-Chan Pai document the atmospheric effect of painted powerboxes in Taichung, Taiwan. Weaving together photo documentation, phenomenological reflection, and analytical commentary, they argue that these seemingly banal artistic interventions actually contribute to the everyday atmosphere of urban life.

In her dialogue with graphic artist Zainab Fasiki, Gwyneth Talley reflects on the impact that the graphic novel *Hshouma: Corps et Sexualité au Maroc* in public discussions regarding the body and sexuality in and beyond Morocco. Acclaimed for its direct confrontation of shame and taboos in Morocco, the book has also been criticized for its use of nudity and the author's secular approach. The dialogue deepens discussions of these issues, exploring the afterlives of image and text. This issue also includes a series of critiques that explore forms of scholarship that expand our understanding of image-driven scholarship and the potential forms of

engagement that might occur on screens or via forms of curatorial display. In his review of Arnd Schneider's *Expanded Visions: A New Anthropology of the Moving Image*, Arthur Ivan Bravo examines the Schneider's "constructive epistemology of anthropological practice" and "the implications of image-based media or visually-oriented thinking" on one's own ethnographic practice. Attending to Schneider's assertion that film, its processes of production, and its very reception may illuminate how artistic, creative practice can serve as a form of social and cultural critique, Bravo's description makes clear that image-driven work can also address forms of restitution and repair. Also turning his attention to the moving image, Martin Gruber critiques Sarah Christman's film *Swarm Season*, where an intimate sensorial approach to visual storytelling makes it possible to accentuate how bees and beekeeping—relationships between mother and daughter—are more than just that. Instead, they can be vehicle for exploring the sensoriality of our multispecies encounter, for reflecting on remoteness and modernity, and for thinking more critically about the intersections between Indigenous and technocratic worlds. In a similar vein, Xinyue Liu engages with the Migrant Ecologies Project's recent exhibition "The Weight of a Bird" curated by Lucy Davis. In both instances, authors engage with a multispecies world greatly affected by the climate crisis and its deleterious effects. Finally, Fred Myers reflects on *Mandayin*, the first exhibition survey of Aboriginal Australian bark painting to be showcased outside of Australia in the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia. Together, these critiques address human and nonhuman ecologies, changing expressive forms, and the exhibitions, films, and visual works that engage with them.

Readers may note that this issue does not include any Page features. This is not strategic nor does it illustrate a lack of interest in the form. We have several Page features in the pipeline and more are coming in. As we think of what to do with this exciting work and the forms of critical dialogic review that may be used to assess them, we will continue to hold on tight to the importance of these photo essays and their inclusion in this platform. However, we hope to do so in ways that continue to illuminate the value of image-driven scholarship, to reinforce the importance of sustaining conversations about image ethics, and to imagine publishing futures that are more inclusive, less precarious, and more precious in their ability to cherish the potential of multimodal scholarship to produce and circulate knowledge that is at once critical and necessary.

References

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¹ The TRACTS network is an interdisciplinary, transnational initiative funded by the European Cooperation in Science and Technology, a funding agency that supports research and innovation networks. TRACTS (CA20134), also known as Traces as Research Agenda for Climate Change, Technology Studies, and Social Justice brings together scholars from disciplines of the social sciences and humanities with artists, decolonial activists, memorialization experts, and legal professionals to bridge current cultural, political, and geographical gaps in research on traces.