Worlding beyond Worlds

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Endings are marked by the urge to look back, take stock, and assess. At *Visual Anthropology Review*, endings are also, very literally, beginnings: members of our editorial office rotate off while others begin. We write the introduction to this issue amidst this moment of change. We do so against a complex, at times impossible, social and political landscape where ideological divisions grow more divisive and where open, meaningful dialogue seems unattainable. There is an urgency with which we and many of our authors write. Words, indeed, images, and the descriptions they generate can elucidate and make visible the complexity of our contemporary moment. They proffer refuge; spaces from which to imagine and enact new forms of resistance.

At the same time, the contributions to this issue also hint at something else: the possibility that many of the concepts so key to our scholarship and teaching might be insufficient. In preparing this introduction, we have had repeated conversations about the current state of things and how geographical distance from the places where we are from complicates our ability to see and understand our present in the same way. In many of these exchanges, we have discussed how, as recently as three years ago, when Lee Douglas first joined this editorial office, there was a shared belief that against the backdrop of the pandemic and the inequalities that it revealed—in the wake of global calls for racial and gender-based justice—other ways of doing scholarship were coming into being. Working for a publication that has long celebrated image-driven knowledge production, there was also a feeling that non-textual forms might find new, more public spaces within our discipline of words. In practice, however, we have found that ushering in new forms of doing anthropology—new forms of working with images and visual worlds—is often complicated by the very structures in which our research and teaching are entangled. In looking back, we have reflected upon the insufficiency of liberal gestures towards resistance and the possibility that we have failed to create other worlds out of the polycrises that have come to characterize our collective present.

How might we move from a romanticization of alternative spaces and frameworks to the creation of practices that might be able to respond to, or even break through, the fortifications of the neo-fascism? How can we get beyond the invocation of an "otherwise," the wish that someone somewhere holds the antidote to the vicissitudes of late capitalist, imperial decline? In response to this constellation, we turn to *worlding*—a concept central to many of the contributions to this issue. Worlding contends that the world is not an objective a priori, but that it is accomplished through the repetition of material and intersubjective practices. In Kathleen Stewart's formulation, worlding is a "refrain." "A scoring over a world's repetitions. A scratching on the surface of rhythms, sensory habits, gathering materialities, intervals, and durations. A gangly accrual of slow or sudden accretions. A rutting by scoring over" (2010, 349). Worlding makes new grooves that may or may not deepen into patterns by way of repetition, "if you allow them to take on some weight, or if you can gather the resources with other people to make them" (Berlant, 2021, 97). Worlding happens when atmosphere crystallizes, when

"something [is pulled] over a threshold into something that becomes recognizable" (Stewart, 2024).

Worlding is work that we, as anthropologists and image-makers, perform. Our work is not merely descriptive. It redescribes what previously has gone unspoken and gives expression to the incipient; it amounts to theories and objects that subtly alter the world through their addition to it. Imagining and enacting other worlds is also a practice to which many of interlocutors and collaborators are committed. We observe and learn from how they create other worlds. Often, we co-create these other realities—the possibility of an otherwise—through the relationships and forms of relation integral to the ethnographic endeavor. In a time of acute emergency, world-making—imagining and inhabiting other possible worlds—can remedy and repair. As Kathleen Stewart suggests, worlding is "a tunneling or an unsettling that animates not because it is a given but because it elicits a virtual mapping" (2024).

Our survival might indeed rely on plotting and carving out heterotopias where it is safe to forget the relations of domination that structure our lives (Foucault 1986). However, we argue, if we think of this as a sufficient form of resistance or that it is enough to offer up redescription, then worlding risks becoming retreat. While it is tempting to imbue the concept of worlding with a romantic, liberatory potential—as if any act of redescription could equally instantiate new ontological conditions—worlding, at least in Stewart's version, implies a "politics of incipience" (2024). In this editorial introduction, we seek to consider how conceptual and methodological frameworks of visual anthropology equip us to articulate emergent ways of life and systems of value, to pull them over the threshold, to which Stewart refers, into something recognizable. As such, they can contribute to these politics of incipience not only by specifying the ethical dimensions of the worlds which may emerge through our ethnographic labor, but also by creating space to reflect on what worlding and reworlding might do beyond mere description.

We argue that, together, the articles in this issue expand and enrich the concept of worlding. They demonstrate how the word itself threatens to flatten out questions of power. Not everyone has the authority to create worlds, not all worlds are equal, and not every attempt at worldmaking is felicitous. Not every world can last or has the power to actually challenge the disciplinary regimes and geopolitical grids that condition our lives and life chances. By extension, the worlds we instantiate can be punctured by pre-existing structures of power, or worn down by the friction of rubbing up against the old world's infractures. We do not mean to fetishize permanence or measure success by how long something lasts but simply to point out that some worlds are backed by force and well-positioned to eclipse other worlds. It also might be the case that what we world might not be what we think it will *or* should be. Our intention is not to dismiss worlding and world-making; we do not rule out the otherwise. Instead, we consider what an incipient visual anthropology might contribute to thinking more complexly about how we imagine, describe, and bring into being the other worlds so desperately needed at this crucial time. In this sense, we agree with Stewart who suggests that "It is not critique's rough handling of what is wrong with the world we need now, but an attunement to the weird

generativities and meanwhiles lodged, launched, and deforming in the broken realism of ongoing histories of dehumanization and foreclosure" (2024).

The authors in this issue are both invested in and skeptical of the worlds that are being worlded in their ethnographic work. As such, they often attend to the unexpected "generativities and meanwhiles" (Stewart, 2024) that can serve as a point of departure for rethinking visual anthropology's contribution and investment in a world otherwise. In "Real Cameras, Irreal Things: Image-making and Ethnographic Insight," Konstantin Georgiev reflects on how para-ethnographic photographic practices—that is, imaging-making around and apart from ethnographic research—shapes not only the questions that we, as anthropologists, bring to the field but also the methods we use to answer them. He begins the article recounting the story of an elderly woman with deteriorating eyesight who used a video camera to record scenes from her everyday life. Later, she would use the zoom function to see things with more clarity, with the camera functioning as a prosthetic to extend her vision. Georgiev compares this to his own para-ethnographic work, in which he collages and layers images to articulate but also to observe connections and affective dimensions that might otherwise go unnoticed. According to Georgiev, these images speak to what linguists refer to as the "irreal mood." The linguistic modality gives form and expression to the atmospheric and invisible, to "things that exist but whose reality has not been directly witnessed by the speaker." In this instance, photographic experimentation, montage, and overlapping surfaces are generative gestures, acts of worlding through which Georgiev attunes himself to local and historically grounded ways of seeing. Here, image-making—but also, making with images—are practices through which the author himself learns to see other incipient worlds.

In "Ethnographic Film as World-making: Connecting Visual Anthropology with Science and Technology Studies," Sanderian Verstappen and Sarah R. Davies put into conversation concepts from STS and Social and Cultural Anthropology, two adjacent but often unlinked disciplines, to explore filmmaking's potential as an ethnographic method. Invested in exploring filmmaking and multimodality's ontological potential, the authors argue that ethnographic filmmaking is not just a means for documenting the mundane aspects of scientific work and the epistemological dimensions of the scientific laboratory, but also a generative practice for studying the intricacies of knowledge production. The authors chart examples from student films produced in their co-taught course "Visual Ethnographies of Science" and describe their embrace of a pedagogical strategy that instantiates the collaborative nature of science and filmmaking. In doing so, they highlight how observational cinema, like technoscientific research, possesses world-making dimensions through its ability to enact the phenomena it seeks to depict. Here, filmmaking—and its collaborative iterations—are a kind of world-making that not only "generates a reality," but also performs into being the knowledge producing practices that it documents. Through their focus on filmmaking as "a transformative encounter," the authors contribute to what Gabriel Dattatreyan and Isaac Marrero-Guillamón (2019) describe as the "politics of invention" in multimodal anthropology not by examining "any particular technological novelty" but by "[reconceptualizing] an established form." In doing so the authors

urge us “to consider the ontological politics of this form of scholarship,” that is “to critically examine what worlds are being worlded by our methods.” Here, the invitation is not only to invent, but rather to consider what feminist scholar Donna Haraway (2016) describes as “thinking practices” (Haraway, 2016) that shape how and what knowledge is being produced, as well as the perspectives of those producing it. By acknowledging the entanglements between subjectivity and objectivity, Verstappen and Davies open new avenues through which to consider how multimodal methods invent, but also how that invention is itself a mode of imagining and constructing other worlds. As such, this article focuses less on the form of multimodal scholarship and more on what is brought into being through visual methodologies.

In a very different key, the photographs in Harmandeep Kaur Gill’s article “Nothing is ever lost or forgotten: Searching for the Traces of Mo Dickyi Sangmo” demonstrate the worldmaking capacity of visual ethnography. Mo Dickyi, a Tibetan refugee living in northwest India, seems contrarian and socially isolated. Her relatives and neighbors perceive her as irritable; her demonstrated longing for life in Tibet seem to be at odds with Buddhist principles that emphasize the impermanence of reality. Through a series of portraits and still lifes from Mo Dickyi’s home, where she was confined in old age, Gill gives tangible expression to the losses that she has experienced. In giving material form to absence, the photographs work against any description of her life as socially or spiritually impoverished. To the contrary, her home contains an entire universe behind a soot covered curtain. A portrait of Mo Dickyi sitting at her kitchen window shows the eponymous figure as comfortably immersed in her environment. The stripes of her skirt blend with the richly colored fabric beside her. The top that she is wearing fades into the dark corner behind her. Another photograph shows Mo Dickyi in silhouette lighting a butter lamp offering. The warm glow of the lamp and the blue rings emanating from the gas stove look almost like a supernova in abstraction, a cosmic phenomenon playing out in the palms of her hands. Together, these photographs ask readers to ponder absence and, more importantly, to imagine how gaps might also be a starting point for articulating connection. Here, photography is a call for a kind of worlding rooted in affective relation.

In this issue’s Dialogue, “Placemaking in the Nuclear Sensorium,” interdisciplinary scholar Shannon Cram and feminist filmmaker Irene Lusztig converse about their experiences tracing everyday life in Hanford, a nuclear company town in Washington State where weapons-grade plutonium was produced and tested for more than four decades. Centered on Lusztig’s placed-based documentary *Richland*, the exchange between Cram and Lusztig reflects upon “the distinct cultural production of atomic narratives in place” and the extent to which filmmaking and sensorial approaches to narratives can “facilitate listening across political and ideological difference.” In many ways, this is a dialogue about dialogue and its possibilities, a detained conversation between filmmaker and researcher whose work asks “what it means to inhabit ongoing complexities and contradictions” of “nuclear heritage.” The conversation reveals Cram and Lusztig’s deep commitment to tracing the impact of atomic weapons, their production, and their lingering chemical presence across time and scales by inhabiting complexity rather than flattening it. As Cram notes in her introductory text, “We discuss the distinct cultural production

of atomic narratives in place, attending to the social and structural conditions that recognize (and fail to recognize) nuclear impact. We talk about how Richland engages with the bomb beyond the frame, inviting forms of sensory attention that activate the invisible." Here, attention to landscape and sound animates what cannot be seen, what Cram describes as a "sensory absence" regarding the history of nuclear contamination. This attention to sensory absence, indeed, forms of collective forgetting, are intricately entangled with "listening-centered documentary practices" that seek to "facilitate listening across political and ideological difference." This, too, is an exploration of worlding in which the sensorial potential of image-making offers the impossible: the ability to listen across political and ideological differences that shape how individuals and communities see and inhabit the world.

The Critiques that appear in this issue also address forms of worlding by reflecting on texts and films that challenge dominant narratives, be they nationalistic, cultural, or ecological, and envision new possibilities for coexistence and belonging. In his review of Natasha Raheja's *A Gregarious Species*, Muhammed A. Kavesh considers how the locust swarms that breach the India-Pakistan border defy national imaginaries and materialize the shared vulnerabilities of more-than-human life in the Anthropocene. In this sense, Kavesh identifies how Raheja's visual narrative constructs a "world" where human and non-human forces intersect and thus destabilizes ideas of sovereignty and control. In this instance, locusts challenge nationalist tropes through their ability to reimagine shared existence on a fragile planet. Similarly, Malvika Maheshwari excoriates the concept of nationalism through the performance photography of Pushpamala N, as documented in *Motherland: Pushpamala N's Woman and Nation*, edited by Monica Juneja and Sumathi Ramaswamy. Arguing that this work critiques the personification of the nation as a maternal figure, Maheshwari explores how Pushpamala's deconstruction of nationalist myths and secular feminist interventions situate image-making as a space for questioning and reconfiguring nationhood. While Maheshwari does not address worlding and world-making directly, she illustrates how Pushpamala's photographic oeuvre opens a dialogic space for envisioning alternative modes of belonging beyond oppressive national frameworks. Moving to another genre of performance, Nataliya Tchermalykh reviews Jonas Tinius' monograph *State of the Arts: An Ethnography of German Theater and Migration.* Following Tinius' examination of Theater an der Ruhr as a site for post-national, egalitarian experimentation in performance, Tchermalykh traces how the author approaches German public theater as a unique ethical, political, and artistic space where culture becomes a "valued common good." Tchermalykh observes how Tinius' description of the Theater an der Ruhr's collaborations with displaced populations and its resistance to conventional narratives of vulnerability offers a counter-narrative and, indeed, counter-practice to exclusionary state policies. Here, German public theater and its histories are constitutive of a "world" where national and cultural boundaries are dismantled.

Finally, authors Leo R. Chavez and Daina Sanchez engage with the auto-ethnographic documentary *First Time Home* co-directed by Indigenous Triqui, second-generation immigrants Esmira Librado, Noemi Librado, Esmeralda Ventura, and Humberto Ventura. Chronicling Triqui

youth as they journey to reconnect with their homelands in Oaxaca, Mexico, the film foregrounds first-hand experiences to portras migration as a deeply human experience that bridges geographical and emotional divides. Chavez and Sanchez argue that the film juxtaposes the lived realities of migration, cultural loss, and resilience to bring into view the construction of diasporic worlds of kinship and belonging. Here, *convivencia*—or coexistence—is a site for making and remaking social worlds where distance can be reimagined as cultural continuity amid displacement. In sum, the works analyzed in this section—ethnographies that trace multispecies entanglements, performative interventions, and migratory journeys—underscore the transformative potential of visual anthropology in rethinking our shared worlds. In a similar tone, this issue's Page feature, "The Place Under the Bridge: A Photo-ethnography of a Temporary Dwelling," speaks to the possibilities that emerge when visual, ethnographic, and public health methodologies intersect. Author Sydney Silverstein engages with photography and the photo essay form as vehicles through which to process the divergent objectives of public health and ethnographic research. Here images and text work together to explore the material surfaces of a temporary dwelling, where discarded things are part of a broader assemblage of addiction and its multiple materialities. Drawing on Rodney Harrison's concept of an "archaeology of the present" (2011, see also de León, 2015), Silverstein uses digital iPhone photography to move between levels of proximity and distance to understand the experience, indeed, world of precarious shelter.

This issue concludes with a Special Section, edited by Sherine Hamdy and Amahl Bishara. Drawing on papers first presented at the 2021 American Anthropological Association's Annual Meeting, the section considers how visual and media anthropologist Faye Ginsburg has shaped the field across geographic regions, including for those working in the Middle East. Hamdy and Bishara's introductory text—part conversation, part personal reflection—demonstrates how Ginsburg's engagement with "shared anthropology, collaborative media practices, and cultural activism" have shaped an important generation of anthropologists engaging with media practices in Southwest Asia and North Africa. The section begins with Wazhmah Osman's auto-ethnographic analysis of her work as a diasporic, subaltern media producer and her experience in a multimodal graduate program. Osman argues that the unruly methodologies of visual anthropology—"unruly," Ginsburg (1998) contends, because they stretch ethnographic filmmaking stretches beyond the confines of academia—are particularly well suited to allow subaltern subjects to document and theorize their own experiences. Turning her attention to other media producers, Zeynep Sertbulut documents the consolidation of new modes of mass subjectivity in Erdogan's populist and increasingly authoritarian Turkey. She argues that Turkey's television rating system promotes the figure of the provincial, Islamicized subject as the archetypal Turkish citizen. Media producers help to world this figure into being when they produce media for a mass audience that they imagine as uneducated and lower-class. A similar process of worlding occurs when these same media producers posit these imagined viewers as a cause of these changes, rather than the effect of state intervention. Narges Bajoghli describes how disabled Iranian veterans have cultivated a counternarrative to the official state

discourse surrounding the Iran-Iraq war. Unable to leverage idioms of martyrdom and sacrifice into material resources and medical care, survivors of chemical warfare began to mobilize as a peace movement. Along the way, they became cultural activists, forging alliances with the International Network of Museums for Peace and founding a Peace Museum in Tehran in 2007. Bajoghli argues that the veterans' work as culture producers is analogous to what Ginsburg (1995) describes as the "parallax effect" in Indigenous media. Turning to other visual forms, Sherine Hamdy and Yasmin Moll contend that illustration uniquely blurs temporal boundaries and allows for new forms of argumentation. It is a way of worlding. For Hamdy's research on the Egyptian Arab Spring uprising, working in the form of a graphic novel allows her to visualize, in collaboration with her interlocutors, that which could have been. For Moll, working in the genre of animated film allows her to visualize Nubian cultural activists' attachment to a landscape that is no longer there, that was displaced in the construction of the Aswan Dam. Here drawing and illustration are capable of bringing into being other worlds.

The Special Section ends with a contribution from Amahl Bishara, who considers the failures and limits of world-making. This is especially pronounced where she describes her documentary, *Take My Pictures For Me,* made in collaboration with Mohammad Al-Azza, a photojournalist from the West Bank. The premise of the film is that Bishara will serve as Al-Azza's eyes. He sends her to locations in Israel's 1948 territories that he is unable to visit and tells her what to photograph. She returns with images that were never what he would have made. In a sense, *Take My Pictures For Me* is a film *about* "worlding" and its limits. Despite and perhaps in part because of her U.S. passport, Bishara fails to give visual form to the fantasies that Al-Azza cannot world for himself. Her failure becomes a game, played across a shifting grid of checkpoints. Al-Azza's vision of the world cannot dislodge the fortifications of the Israeli state. In documenting her failures and the incommensurability of Al-Azza's fantasy and the realities of the zionist state, Bishara gives visual form to a different affective sensibility. The film dramatizes, with humor, Bishara's nagging sense that diasporic Palestinians have failed "over and over again, to make progress towards liberation, or even toward basic security for Palestinians, even as those more profoundly dispossessed have persisted in struggle."

The film worlds a relationality, a politics of care and commitment, a willingness to fail, and a common understanding that failure is far preferable to not acting at all. Bishara's "failure" suggests that a concept of worlding must acknowledge the dimension of power. Similarly, it makes evident the need to keep making worlds and heterotopias despite failing over and over. Here, the very limits of this analytic, discussed at the opening of this editorial introduction, become something to embrace. Failures to world—to control or fully understand what is being worlded—creates spaces of play and imagination within the uneven dominations of ordinary life. This is, perhaps, possible and necessary if we are to access hope when hope seems impossible. Failure can be satisfying when it opens up other avenues that call our attention to the multiplicity of "weird generativities and meanwhiles" and their capacity to world beyond words, indeed, beyond worlds in our contemporary state of emergency and dissociation (Stewart 2024).

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