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Close Encounters of a Hairy Kind

Society for Visual Anthropology

Emma Tarlo

November 20, 2017

Hair is something we think we know. Growing spontaneously from our heads, demanding attention throughout our lives, it is intrinsically bound up with our identities and biographies, our sense of who we are. We know it by its appearance, texture, and feel, its ability to frame and represent us or let us down. We are familiar with its poetry, its capacity to attract, seduce, and frustrate. Hair is intimate yet flexible, one of the means through which we can express social and cultural belonging, religious and political sympathies, and aesthetic concerns. Hair is quite literally saturated with human life.



Emma Tarlo

But hair is also a commodity in a billion dollar market for wigs and extensions. In this context it is detached, collected up, accumulated, recycled, refashioned, and redistributed worldwide in what is a thriving and expanding global industry. For the past few years I have been tracing the choreography of this trade, unearthing the many human stories in which hair is entangled as it transfers from head to head, crossing not only continents but also social, religious, and cultural boundaries.

In this peripatetic [ethnographic project](#), hair has been my guiding thread, leading me to many apparently disparate places: doorsteps and temples in South India, untangling workshops in Myanmar, wig factories in China, markets in Senegal, as well as Jewish wig parlors, Afro hair fairs, salons, and hair loss clinics in Europe and the United States where hair becomes reanimated and woven into new intimate projects of self enhancement. Much of the research has focused on the backstage of the industry, the moments betwixt and between, when hair has been disconnected from heads across Asia but not yet found new heads to which to become attached in Europe, Africa, or the United States. At such moments we are confronted with hair in all its rawness, stripped away from bodies, identities, and cultures, robbed of intimacy, alienated, hi-jacked in limbo, disembodied and strange.



Emma Tarlo

Accompanying me throughout this research was my camera which functioned as companion, witness, recorder, archivist, interpreter, and instrument of reflection. It enabled me to engage with the strangeness of disembodied hair and to convey the shock and vibrations of encounters with it. This was not a case of the camera confronting hair but of hair confronting the camera, its visceral presence so powerful that it seemed to suck in visual attention and demand interrogation. Hair was

the protagonist: hair laid out to dry in a courtyard like a crop of sun-dried tomatoes; hair puffed up and bulging from bags like witches' candy floss freshly spun; hair slung across a cheap plastic chair like evidence from the scene of a brutal murder; hair in all its material rawness and ontological confusion; hair which seemed to epitomize what Mary Douglas meant by "matter out of place" and what Julia Kristeva articulates as being beyond articulation.



Emma Tarlo

I remember walking into a wig factory in China and thinking I was looking at a vat of steaming noodles for the workers' lunch only to realize that it was freshly bleached blond hair that had just been removed from a dying vat. I experienced the same confusion when I saw what looked like spring onions dangling from a sauce pan but which turned out to be hanks of hair being dyed at the roots for use in a custom made wig. I remember stumbling across globs of filthy mangled hair balls on the ground in a suburb of Mandalay. They looked like something between human feces and sheep droppings but they were combings—fallen hair that had been carefully saved from the combs of hundreds of thousands of women throughout Myanmar, transported across the country by foot, bicycle, and truck and accumulated ready for untangling, hackling, and sorting. This was hair in transit on its way to China where it would be bleached, dyed, and retextured for wigs and extensions for export. Revisiting the image of this field of human droppings, I note the voracious way the hair seems to devour the space.



Emma Tarlo

Images are fraught with ambiguity which makes them an apt medium for posing questions, suggesting associations and exploring doubts. They let time stop and imagination wonder. Taken together the images reproduced here seem to be asking: Is hair animal, vegetable, or human? Is it a form of excrement or a simply an organic fiber like cotton or wool?

Seeing hair in its liminal state allows us to dwell on its liminal status. Is hair alive or dead? If dead, why does it look so disturbingly life like? Is it the texture? The movement? The sheen? The way it seems to cling to walls and surfaces with apparent deliberation? The way it rises from the floor as if seeking to make itself heard? Or is it its structural similarity to sheep's wool, bird feathers, and horses' tails—its brute animality that reminds us that we too are animal? If live, why does detached hair seem so unutterably deathly, evoking images of mortality and decay, recalling memories of the Holocaust and conjuring up the pitiful ghosts of those to whom it might once have been attached? Hair haunts. Confronted by piles of it, we cannot help but wonder: Whose hair is it? How did it get here? Under what conditions was it obtained? What sort of human harvest is this?



Emma Tarlo

The camera hovers, lingers, dwells, magnifies, lets affect have its effect and effect its affect. It gives access to what is not normally seen and suggests the possibility of seeing things differently. We get a sense of the scale of the trade in human hair and encounter the pathos of hair without heads. Glamorous blond wigs, fabricated out of bleached Chinese hair, look curiously out of place in the context of a filthy back yard in Xuchang but seeing them here conveys something very different from seeing them in the wig shop in Manchester where they are destined to travel. Viewed in Xuchang the wigs seem to question the very idea of glamour, hinting at the circumstances of production, the out of sight labor practices that went into their making and the economic disparities that sustain the global economy.

What sort of companions are words and images? What relationship did they establish in this research? Images were never a substitute for the complex web of narratives yielded by the hair trade but they were a vocal participant in them, complicating and intensifying them and capturing something of the reverberating strangeness of close encounters with hair.

Emma Tarlo is a professor of anthropology at [Goldsmiths, University of London](#). To read more about her research on hair read her new book, winner of the Victor Turner Ethnographic Writing Prize, 2017 *Entanglement: The Secret Lives of Hair*. All images in the article were taken by the author.

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