Contingency in the Himalayas: Dakshinkali, Nepal.

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Engaging photography globally entails the study of actually existing social practice. Frequently the diversity of practice is presented as an argument against the possibility of an ontology of photography, the seemingly unavoidable conclusion being that there are multiple culturally embedded and incommensurable 'photographies'.

However, photography's ontology centres on its contingency and the troublesome and subversive nature of the event. This is evidenced by the lengths people in different parts of South Asia go to circumvent and supress this: that which practice unsuccessfully attempts to negate, directs our attention to an inescapable ontology.

Dakshinkali lies in a small valley to the south of Kathmandu, about one hour up a circuitous and ruined road that leads into the hills. It is the location of a major temple to the goddess Kali and on Tuesdays and Saturdays attracts large crowds, many of whom sacrifice cockerels and have their

photographs taken by one of many studios in the bamboo shacks that line the road that descends towards the shrine.

The studios, twenty in total, are all very recent (the oldest, Ram Studio, having been established only in 2013). They are all dependent on an equally recent interdiction: the prohibition of photography inside the temple precincts. Dakshinkali is located in a grove in a small valley and its ancient Kali murti (or statue) is open to the elements and visible from the forecourt of the shrine. Devotees wait in this area, and frequently photograph each other on their mobile phones in front of the general backdrop of the temple.
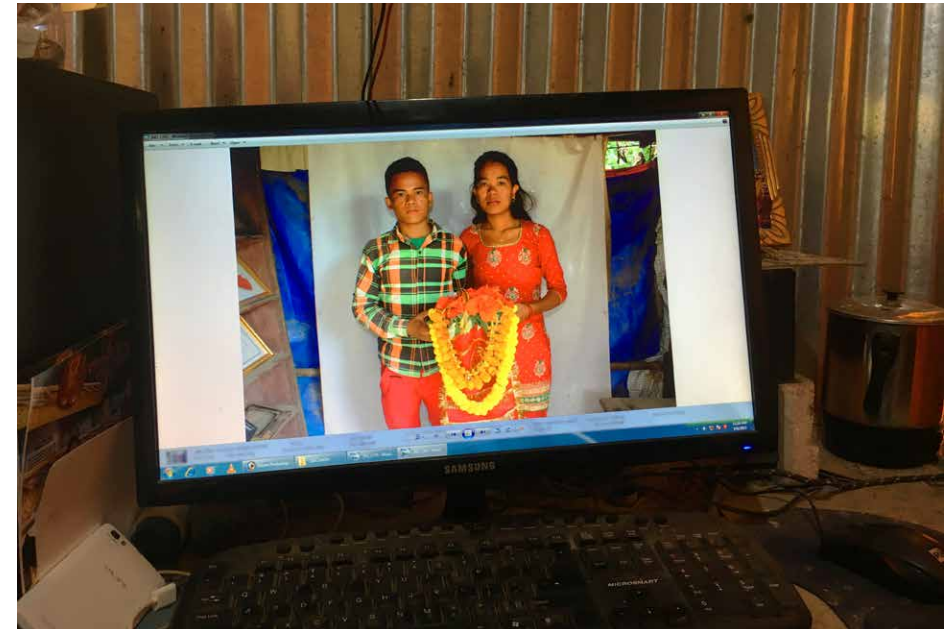
However, photography is forbidden in the visually similar area ten or fifteen feet nearer the actual murti. A flex banner hung above the perimeter of the shrine declares the prohibition in Nepali and English, together with images of cameras crossed through with red lines. This interdiction provides the ostensible alibi for the enthusiastic photographic studio activity that surrounds the shrine.

Clients tend to be regular visitors to Dakshinkali and are familiar with the topography and ritual architecture and know in advance that it makes sense to be photographed on their way down to the shrine and collect the framed image on their way back to the bus stand. Although referred to as 'studios' most of the photographic establishments photograph their clients in the street since they lack the space to do this inside. The first one, which one encounters as one alights from the bus, is Matakali Digital Photo Studio, run by two phlegmatic Tamang brothers who also sell chickens (presented in two iron cages at the front of the studio) for sacrificial purposes.

There is a plenitude of studios but a remarkable singularity of practice. Clients are most commonly given a plastic bowl to hold, which will be substituted via Photoshop with an elaborate and opulent display of offerings of the kind which are for sale on the stalls adjacent to the studios. Photographing clients with a camera is the speedy part of the process after which the image is composed on computers housed in the main part of the shacks. The resulting images are then inket printed in the studio and usually inserted into a plastic frame in time for the client to collect on their way out.

The prohibition of photography provoked Ram, the proprietor of the first studio, to import Photoshop templates from Manakamana, the famous goddess shrine on the Kathmandu-Pokhara Highway. These are now in the possession of all the studios and depict, goats, doves, garlands and cable cars among

other motifs alongside the English text 'Sweet memories of Manakamana' and in Nepali 'Manakamana Darshan' with the date according to the Vikram Samvat (VS) calendar.

Modern Dakshinkali photography exemplifies a ritual mode that attempts to suppress or minimize contingency. The need to do this points to the ontological unruliness and troublesome nature of the photographic event. Dakshinkali can be placed alongside other South Asian restrictive systems of visibility such as those established in the Shrinathji haveli in Nathdvara in north India that attempt to minimise contingency through enforcing a devotional symmetry.

The boldest 20th century theorization of photography, by Walter Benjamin, has pitted photography against the cultic. But for Benjamin this was a prescriptive and programmatic exercise in what photography 'ought' to do if it was able to pursue what was 'native' to it (2008:286). Benjamin's approach was hardly ethnographic and he often has cause to lament the divergence between the effects photography should have and the uses to which it was actually put.

Siegfried Kracauer's method, by contrast, engaged popular uses of the camera. As Philippe Despoix has noted he 'approache[d] photography primarily as a vector of mass culture' (2014:11). Kracauer's more anthropological concerns encouraged close attention to the

circulation and reading of images. It is in this context that Kracauer focused on the manner in which 'the definitive fixing of an ephemeral moment' became one of 'the sharpest indicators of the crisis in the modern relation to transcendence and to eternal time that religion promised' (Despoix 2014:8). Dakshinkali photographic practices seek to recuperate eternal time through the minimization of contingency.

The minimization of photographic contingency apparent in Rajasthani Nathdvara manorathas and the move from the Dakshinkali shrine to the highly mediated Photoshopped space of the studio recalls a central argument advanced by the anthropologist Maurice Bloch which we might think of as an anthropological re-invention of some of the key concerns of Benjamin's Work of Art essay. What Benjamin termed the 'cultic' becomes for Bloch 'traditional authority', a political force that he contrasts with 'everyday speech acts'. He maps the opposition between 'everyday speech acts' and 'formalized speech acts'. The former are characterized by a complete vocabulary, the absence of stylistic rules and numerous choices concerning presentation. The latter involves exclusions, limitations, and fixity. This language of traditional authority is, Bloch notes, an 'impoverished language' one in which 'many of the options at all levels of language are abandoned so that choice of form, or style, of words and of

syntax is less than in ordinary language' (Bloch 1989:25).

The conventional photographic event has a similar openness to that of everyday speech acts and is marked by contingency and a troublesome unruliness (Here I taken my cue from Walter Benjamin: recall his observation that 'No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible compulsion to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, the here and now, with which reality has, so to speak, seared through the image-character of the photograph' (2008:276).

Benjamin of course does not deny

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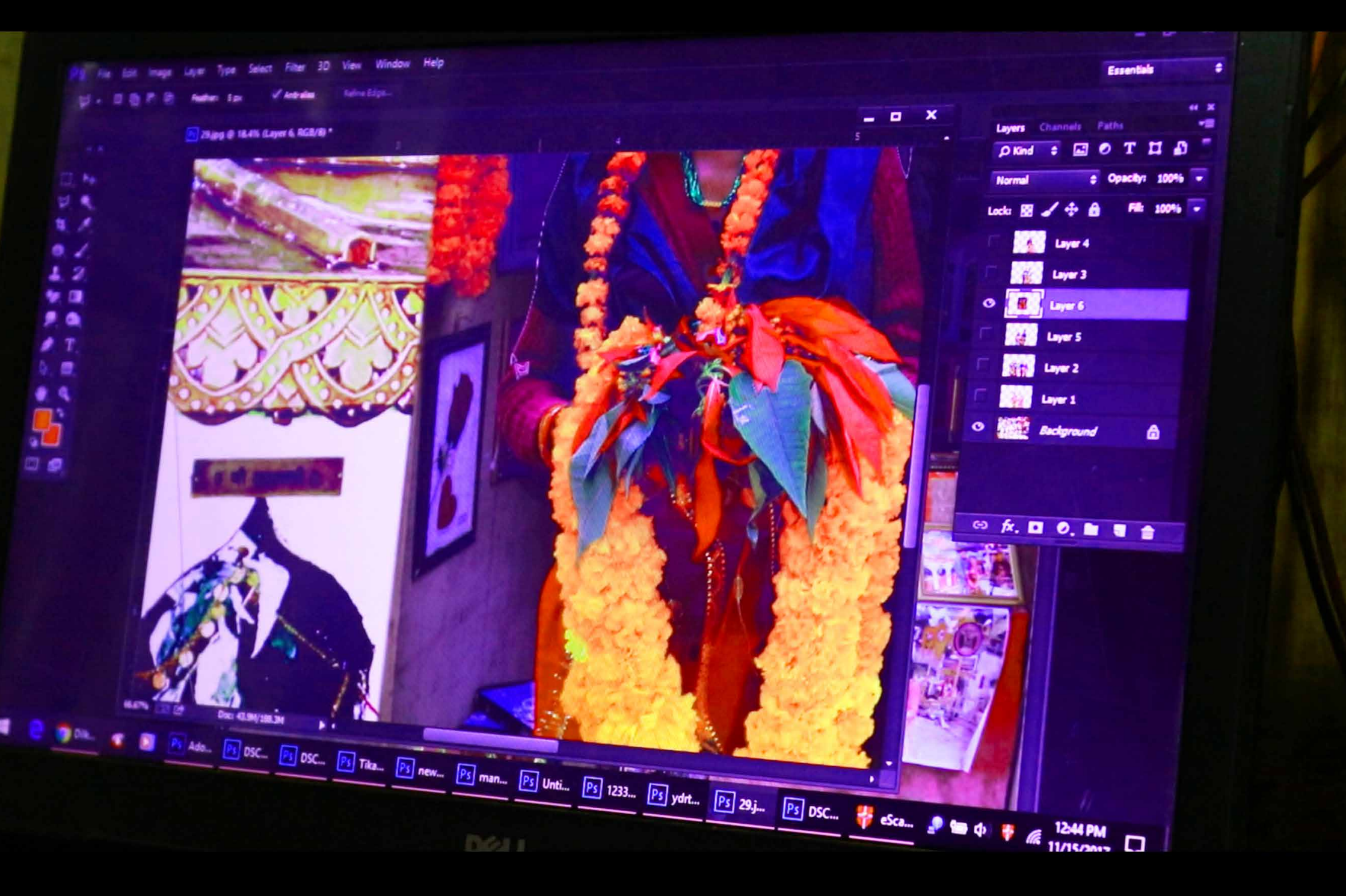
that the photographer is likely, perhaps certain, to attempt to massage or finesse the profilmic and this is what we see at Dakshinkali. But attempts to eliminate contingency will never be wholly successful. The screen or filter will never be complete because the complexity of the mise-en-scène in its minute and infinite details will always evade the anxious control of the photographer. The image is 'seared' with the event which deposits more information than the photographer can ever control. It is this searing which deposits those 'tiny spark[s] of contingency,' which make the photograph such a rich resource for future viewers.

Variation in practices, and apparent inversions or negations, do not imply that a vision of multiple 'photographies' is our only option. Spatializing and localizing need not result in fragmentation. The road from Dakshinkali leads back to central questions about photographic ontology.

References

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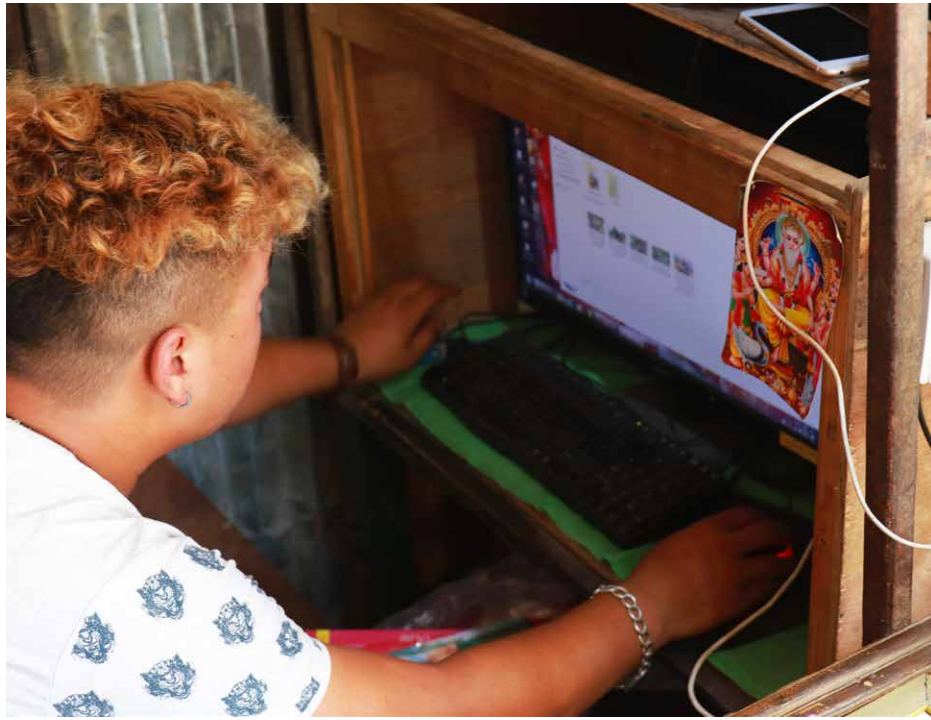
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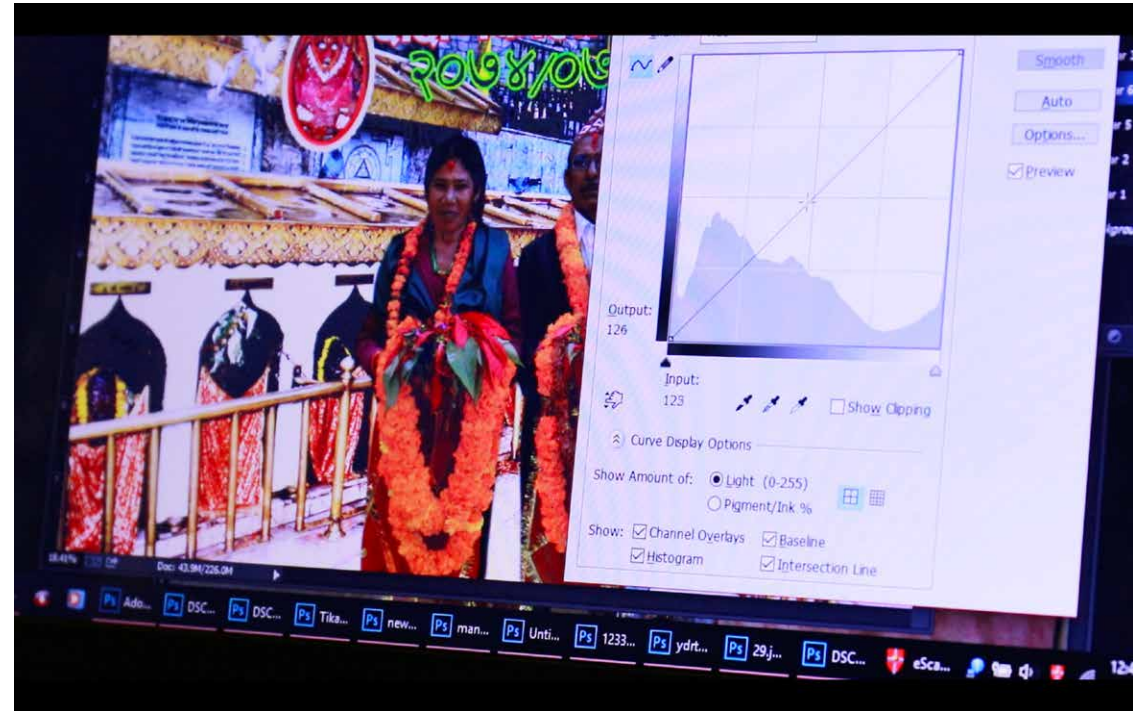
Citizens of Photography: the Camera and the Political Imagination

The PhotoDemos project is an empirical anthropological investigation into the relationship between "representation" through everyday images and "representation" through politics.

The PhotoDemos Collective is a group of six researchers.

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