

The Experience of Visuality and Socially Engaged Practice

by Anthony Luvera

I look upon the field of visual studies from a specific standpoint. As an artist with a disciplinary grounding in the photographic medium, the way I work is variously described as collaborative, participatory, or socially engaged. That is, I work in concert with individuals and groups of people who are often seen as marginalised, excluded, or overly-spoken for, to speak out about their experiences and the systems that shape their everyday lives. In doing so, I employ a range of mediums alongside photography and lens-based media, including sound, text, performance, public engagement events, online spaces, and participative research. In my view, as a practitioner, to work interdisciplinarily is to navigate away from the basecamp of a particular discipline towards other fields of study, in order to return, through practice and critical reflection, with a renewed attempt to make sense of what is represented, the means by which this visualisation is constructed, and the implications of the contextual terrain within which visual artefacts circulate and the experiences of visuality evoked through these contexts.

Visuality, the object of visual studies, as I understand it, encompasses more than the production and consumption of objects, and critical interpretation of the aesthetic and material qualities of these artefacts. Arguing against perceiving visuality purely on material or essentialist terms, Meike Bal stated, 'it is the possibility of performing acts of seeing, not the materiality of the object seen, that decides whether an artefact can be considered from the perspective of visual culture studies' (2003:11). Responding to Bal, Gillian Rose has suggested, 'the occasionality of the visual event' should also be taken into account with objects of visual studies seen as, 'located social, affective and economic events... an account that considers the importance of institutional context, of the people who funded, installed and looked at them' (2011:547). The object of visual studies is constituted by visual artefacts, contexts, and systems of exchange and circulation, and the role each of these factors play in the construction and experience of visuality.

Central to my reading of the purpose of visual studies is the critical dismantling of the ideologies and power structures of visuality in the social, cultural, and political exchanges which enmesh our lives. To critically consider the object domain of visual studies, then, is to prioritise examination of intersubjective determinants which shape experiences of visuality and the ways visuality shapes experience. As WJT Mitchell has pointed out, '[the] complex field of visual reciprocity is not merely a by-product of social reality but [is] actively constitutive of it' (1996:82). In this sense, visuality is viewed as a melding of cultural production, social interaction, power relations, ethics, and the assertion, limitation or overlap of agency by individuals and institutions, as they encounter or construct the visual world. Visuality is a conditional phenomenon which is both determined and negotiated, interposed and immediate, autonomous and conscripted, mediated and experienced.

The interdisciplinary coalition of academic disciplines and discourses assembled in visual studies cuts across a broad range of subject areas, including art history, anthropology, ethnography, film and media studies, literature, psychology, and sociology. The sprawling boundaries of the field traverses multiple disciplines, discourses, and methodologies, having evolved in distinct ways in multiple geographic locations with specific theoretical inflections, lineages, and traditions (Elkins et al 2012; Moxey 2008). Consequently, it may be said visual studies has no methodology uniquely its own. Yet, regardless of the application of specific disciplines and critical frameworks, the qualities which may be said to define a visual studies perspective include self-reflexivity, analysis, institutional critique, critical reconsideration of historical visual and cultural regimes, and visual literacy pedagogy. Aspects of the objecthood of visuality which may be less conspicuous when considered by one discipline alone can be brought into focus when synthesized with methodological inquiry and critical interrogation brought from others. Each discipline offers distinct lines of questioning arising from its specific discourse, methodologies, historiography, and analytical frameworks. The convergence of critical discourse (analysis) and methodological tools (praxis) each particular academic discipline brings can enable a more replete discussion than any one field of study might achieve on its own. However, the value of interdisciplinarity in visual studies is not in simply clustering disciplines around an object. The value of

interdisciplinarity is in how the convergence of discourses and methodological enquiries can enable visuality to be identified in new ways.

To my mind, the conception of the objecthood of visuality as experience, the mobility and discursivity enabled by interdisciplinarity, and the qualities of methodological enquiry characteristic of a visual studies perspective correspond to aspects of socially engaged photography. While examples chosen from within this community of practice can be as varied as there are individuals working in this way, to greater or lesser degrees, artists working in this field are engaged in a reflexive, critical practice founded on visual literacy pedagogy. The intentions of a practitioner and the specific interdisciplinary methods they employ, the lived experience and cultural backgrounds of participants, and the contexts within which the artist and participant work together, including the shaping effects imposed through the agenda of funders and commissioning organisations, will all have a bearing on the process which drives the practice.

Underpinning my practice is an attempt to recalibrate the relationship between a photographer and subject by inviting participants to take part in a process of facilitation, pedagogy, dialogue, and co-creation. The methodologies I employ are informed by visual research methods used in the social sciences, including auto-photography, secondary data and archival study, image-elicitation interviews, focus groups, and expressive data collection. The conceptual inquiry, theoretical grounding, and pedagogical impulse of my practice is informed by the writings and practices of anthropologists and sociologists such as Johannes Fabian and Norbert Elias; techniques developed by the theatre practitioner Augusto Boal; the social design work of performance artists such as Lois Weaver; and approaches to radical education developed by Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, and bell hooks. In particular, Freire's model of education, a dialogical practice that seeks to enable critical consciousness by uncovering the systems and processes that normalize exclusion and oppression (1996), has continued to drive one of the questions that has remained central to my practice for almost twenty years: how can a photographer address the power (im)balance between them and the people they represent?

The projects I create with individuals and community groups have included long-term collaborations with people experiencing homelessness, individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+, children from lower socio-economic households, and migrant women from Eastern European backgrounds. Each project brings together multiple voices to express narratives about the lived experience of participants and present information about the process of our working together. The process I facilitate when working with participants encompasses a range of activities, from the development of skills to enable the elicitation of information and responses in relation to a specific issue through to community organising and social action. Critical reflection on the progression and culmination of this process informs the methods of inquiry and presentation strategies I bring to future collaborations and the creation of new work.



Figure 1: Documentation of the making of *Not Going Shopping* by Anthony Luvera (2013 – 2014)

One of the lessons I have learnt over the years relates to the challenge of conveying information about the process of collaboration. While the composition and sequencing of photographs, texts, sound recordings, or any other artefacts

presented in a body of work created through socially engaged practice may not be achieved in the same manner without the process unfolding in the way it did, the complexity of the intersubjective experience which shapes the work can be imperceptible to those not involved in its making. As such, socially engaged practice is particularly reliant on forms of documentation and description in order to provide insight into the process experienced by the artist and participants. These accounts are usually mediated by the artist, organizations involved in the production of the work, and, perhaps less often, through testimonials provided by participants. The challenge with reading these narratives is seeing past the artist's or organisation's aspirations, to determine the ethical dimensions of the contribution, conduct, and expression of agency by all parties involved: the artist, the participant, and any other individuals or institutions that have a stake in the production of the practice and the contexts in which it circulates (Luvera 2020). As such, it is not enough to only consider what is represented or depicted, the experience of audiences, the contexts in which the work is situated, and the social dynamics of the process that gave rise to the production of the practice must all be taken into account. Gaining insight into this process, and any claims made about the social, political, or ethical efficacy of the practice, is key to critical readings of the visuality of socially engaged practice.



Figure 2: Documentation of the making of *Assisted Self-Portrait of Ben Evans from Assembly* (2013 – 2014) by Anthony Luvera

With these factors in mind, I have explored a number of ways to enable the evolution of the structures, dialogues, relationships, decisions, and tensions that shape the work to be perceived, using various forms of documentation and first-hand accounts given by participants. This can be seen in the polyvocal blogs created by participants throughout the process of co-production of projects such as *Not Going Shopping* (2013 – 2014), notgoingshopping.blogspot.com, and *Let Us Eat Cake* (2017), letuseatcake.blog. The soundscape of *Assembly* (2013 – 2014) represents the collaborative process through audio, featuring sound recordings created by participants, audio documentation of the co-creation of *Assisted Self-Portraits*, and recordings made with the community choir, The Cascade Chorus, as we devised a public performance for an exhibition of the work. A number of methods are used in *Frequently Asked Questions* (2014 – ongoing) to represent the experience of my collaborator, Gerald Mclaverty, and the numerous contributors to this ongoing project, including writings and spoken accounts given by Gerald, responses by exhibition visitors on the walls of the gallery, and contributions by audiences taking part in workshops, reflective spaces, choir performances, film screenings, Long

Table discussions, and the other participatory events that form the whole of this multi-layered work (Figures 3 and 4). In each of these projects, I see the process of facilitation, co-production, and collaboration, and the experiences of those participating in this process, as much of an outcome of the practice as the artefacts that are exhibited and published.



Figure 3: Workshop with Established Beyond, *Frequently Asked Questions* (2014 – ongoing) by Anthony Luvera, State of the Nation with Museum of Homelessness, Tate Liverpool, 22nd to 28th January 2018

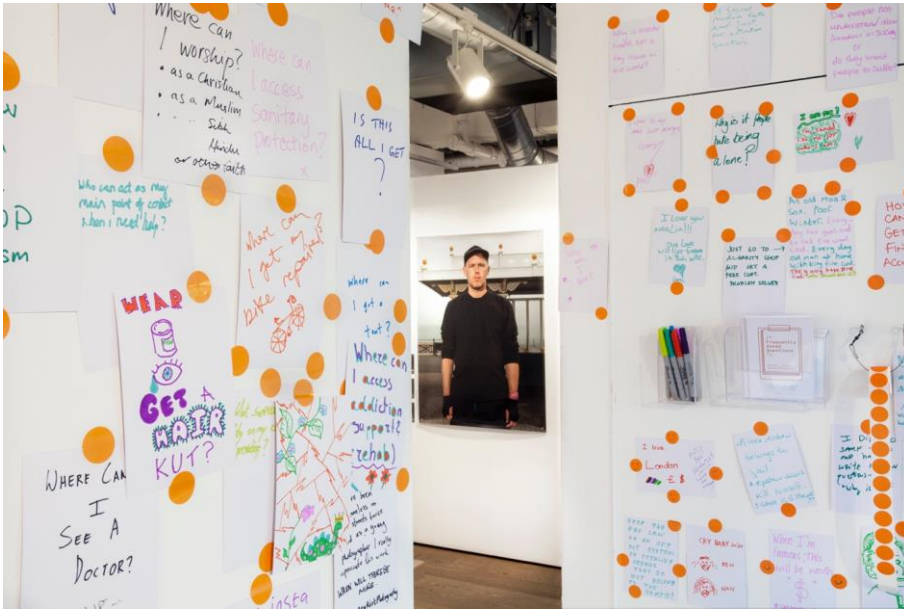


Figure 4: Installation of *What are your questions?* from *Frequently Asked Questions* by Anthony Luvera (2014 – ongoing) in Anthony Luvera: Taking Place at The Gallery at Foyles, London, 11 January to 29 February 2020

As with any interpretive and analytical practice that seeks to consider the realm of the experience of others, to call the experience of visibility into question, it must be asked, whose experience is represented? How is this experience mediated to others? How are we to understand the social, political, economic, and ethical encounters that brought this experience forward to be [encountered-seen](#) by audiences? Such questions strike at the heart of the power dynamic at play in socially engaged practice as deeply as they do when considering visibility through the lens of visual studies. [Seen-Viewed](#) largely as the domain of the academic, scholar, and critic, visual studies navigates a rocky terrain in avoiding the pitfalls of propping up another kind of connoisseurship. As Rose has argued, there is value in the role ethnographic methods and the field of audience studies can play in the development of approaches to ameliorate the potential of this problem (2011). For, while it may be said it is the viewer who makes meaning, viewers are almost always absent in critical accounts. And as for me, in the end, I believe consideration of any cultural object is impossible without [critical examination/interrogation](#) of the culture-at-large it was created within, for, or against.

[Anthony Luvera](#)

[Centre for Arts, Memory and Communities](#)

[Coventry University](#)

[Biography](#)

[Anthony Luvera is an artist, writer and educator based in London. His work has been exhibited widely in galleries, public spaces, and festivals, including Tate Liverpool, People's Republic of Stokes Croft, The Gallery at Foyles, British Museum, London Underground's Art on the Underground, National Portrait Gallery London, Belfast Exposed Photography, Australian Centre for Photography, Photolreland, Malmö Fotobiennial, Goa International Photography Festival, and Les Rencontres D'Arles Photographie. His writing appears regularly in a wide range of publications including Photoworks, Source, Photographies, and Photography and Culture. Anthony is Associate Professor of Photography in the Centre for Arts, Memory and Communities at Coventry University, and editor of Photography For Whom?, a periodical about socially engaged photography. He also designs education and mentorship programmes, facilitates workshops, and gives lectures for the public education departments of Tate Britain, the National Portrait Gallery, Royal Academy of Arts, The Photographers' Gallery, Photofusion, Barbican Art Gallery, Magnum Photos, and community photography projects across the UK.](#)

www.luvera.com

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Luvera, A

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