Empathic Projections:
Visual Anthropology, Design, and Acknowledgement

Michael J. Golec

Averting or embracing our capacity for acknowledgement results from what we are willing to take-in what there is to see. In this sense, the photo essay in general confronts us with the limits of our capacities. This essay attempts to examine how it is that the photo essay and its design contend with imagination and acknowledgment. Considering recent editorial initiatives and a redesign of Visual Anthropology Review, *and, in greater depth, Feldman and Pérez's photo essay "Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19," this essay asks: How does the photo essay—and relatedly, the photograph—in its looks face the possibility of a resistance to acknowledge the reality it depicts?*

In preparing my essay for this issue of *Visible Language*, I came across an introduction to the Fall 2020 issue of *Visual Anthropology Review* (*VAR*), written by co-editors Fiona McDonald and Stephanie Sadre-Orafai, entitled "Empathy, care, and dialogue: Transforming visual anthropology's publics." Reading their brief introductory remarks on Lindsey Raisa Feldman and Michael Vicente Pérez's "Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19," I learned two things, both of which are crucial to what appears below. First, Feldman and Perez's contribution constitutes a return of "The Page," an editorial initiative introduced in 2016 by then co-editors Jenny Chio and Rupert Cox. According to the previous co-editors of *VAR*, "The Page" extends anthropological scholarship by attending to "the relational analytics of image and text selection, placement, and layout in the two-dimensional space of the journal page..." (Chio & Cox, 2016, p. 101). The Fall 2020 issue of *VAR* marks the return of "The Page" after a year-long absence. Second, according to McDonald and Sadre-Orafai, "In its ideal form ethnographic fieldwork centers on both empathy and care for those with whom we [anthropologists] live, work, and come to know through embedded field engagements" (McDonald & Sadre-Orafai, 2020, p. 206). I find this observation both heartening and enlightening.

It is instructive, too, because I'm interested in how the photo essay and its design respond to our attitudes toward acknowledgement, or what the philosopher Cora Diamond (2003) called "the difficulty of reality." Acknowledgement is, according to the philosopher Stanley Cavell (1969), an attitude that is practically expressed in how we engage with the world and its inhabitants. This mode of engagement can go either way in terms of positive or negative receptivity. As he pointed out, "[T]he concept of acknowledgement is evidenced equally by its failure as by its success" (Cavell, 1969, pp. 263–264). Averting or embracing our capacity for acknowledgement results from what we are willing to take-in—to absorb— what there is to see. In this sense, the photo essay confronts us with the limits of our capacities: it might overwhelm the imaginative range of some beholders, while simultaneously, for others, it might fail to capture attention, or perhaps succeed only in just doing so, before attention passes on to

Visible
Language

55 · 3

Michael J. Golec
Empathic Projections: Visual Anthropology,
Design, and Acknowledgement

another interest. In the former case, the photo essay turns us toward reality by triggering our imagination, as an instance of what the philosopher Iris Murdoch (1971) identified as "an apprehension of the real" or with a change of standpoint to come to take the world as it exists (p. 88). The nature of the technology itself *acknowledges* our outlook on acknowledgement. Because things—events, persons, objects, scenes, etc.—are there to see in photographs, there are always things to be thought differently about the things to see in photographs, hence a new view is always available to a beholder. The logic of averting or embracing acknowledgement, then, entails that we are willing and able to see what the photo essay shows, *or not*. Therefore, it isn't only the case that the photographs therein have to overcome an aversion to what the photo essayist means to communicate. In its design, the photo essay anticipates a beholder who is recalcitrant and/or unable to acknowledge, even though there is no guarantee that such a design will be met with success in overcoming these obstacles. In my attempt to know how it is that the photo essay and its design contend with imagination and acknowledgment, I ask: how does the photo essay—and relatedly, the photograph—in its *looks* face the possibility of a resistance to acknowledge the reality it depicts? (Where I use the terms "look" or "looks" to indicate a visual display, I am referring to the intentional organization of marks or inscriptional forms on surfaces—be they graphic, typographic, and/or photographic—for the purposes of being perceived.)

One possible answer: the photographer and photo essayist, in the act of photographing (in the broadest sense), confronts the difficulty of reality, and in doing so brings about a change of thought and a new mode of seeing in the beholder. And there is more. This shift of perspective is the crux of Feldman and Pérez's (2020) photo essay "Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19," in which, through a "co-constitutive process of image making in the field," the anthropologists bring about an imaginative turn in their ethnographic research (p. 383). They achieved this by inviting their research participants to choose the circumstances under which they were photographed, and by providing opportunities for input into the images that were produced as part of the interview process. By an imaginative turn in confronting the technical standards of the apparatus, Feldman and Pérez show what empathy and care look like when photographed and designed as a photo essay.

Before I continue, there is a very brief history to recount. Let me start from the beginning. As I mentioned above, in 2016, *VAR* inaugurated "The Page." Chio and Cox (2016) invited the photographer-scholar Patrick Sutherland (2016) to contribute an article, "The photo essay," to the journal. In their editorial introduction to the issue in which his article appears, the co-editors explained that they asked Sutherland to reflect on key elements in the history of the photo essay and requested that he extrapolate the relationship between visual anthropology, documentary

photography, and photojournalism. The photo essay is exemplary of a rich history of primarily image-based, but also text-related, research that intersects with visual anthropology's already "reflexive awareness of the social relations at stake in the process of making images and an engagement with the politics of representation" (Chio & Cox, 2016, p. 101). Sutherland (2016) confirmed the reciprocity of these intersections when he observed that exemplary works of photographically led research benefit from "the depth of anthropological understanding and analysis" (p. 120).

In his article, Sutherland (2016) compared four examples of photo essays, each of which touched on a variety of combinations of photographic, textual, and paratextual approaches. Beginning with Bourgois and Schonberg's (2009) *Righteous Dopefiend* and moving on to consider Eppridge's (1965) *LIFE* magazine feature on drug addiction, Clark's (1971) *Tulsa*, and Richards' (1994) *Cocaine True Cocaine Blue*, he argued that the history of the photo essay provides useful exemplars for visual anthropology by combining "depth, commitment, detail, and subtlety of. . . ethnographic field research and anthropological analysis with photography" (Sutherland, 2016, p. 120). As both a technology and as a technique of visual investigation, Sutherland offered, photography can and often does exceed the merely procedural recording of "the world as everybody sees it" (Sutherland, 2016, p. 120). This entails the photographer undertaking a search to find a strategy that will, as a matter of visual representation, exceed the everyday or ordinary workings of tools like cameras and the kinds of pictorial conventions they reinforce. Sutherland (2016) observed that a photographer can take distinctive views—or *stands*—and that photographic images capture these unique perspectives. Everything—the entire world—is given to the photographer. It's all there for the (picture) taking. Yet, the challenge is for her to focus on an element that often escapes views taken by everybody else. As Sutherland implied with his examples and comparisons, the photo essayist photographs *something* and not everything, and that *something* photographed is a result of having to contend with, and overcome, commonplace, and therefore, unconsciously applied conventions.

Elaborating on the visible elements that exceed ordinary views taken of the world, Sutherland provided a thought-provoking observation. He asked the visual anthropologist to attend to the perceived "gap between what the world looks like through the camera viewfinder and what the resulting photograph looks like," in the pursuit of a critical and creative practice. He then quoted the American street photographer Garry Winogrand: "I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed" (as cited in Sutherland, 2016, p. 121, n. 13). The "gap" that Sutherland spoke of registers the *constructedness* of what *something* looks like from both the camera's and the photographer's perspectives. By mentioning a "gap" and referencing Winogrand, Sutherland introduced a procedural means-to-an-end logic that suggested how *something* may

Visible
Language

55 · 3

Michael J. Golec
Empathic Projections: Visual Anthropology,
Design, and Acknowledgement

come to appear in a photograph, and therefore can be seen in it. When
something appears in an image or picture, according to the philosopher
Richard Wollheim (1987), a beholder experiences the phenomena of seeing-
in, or representational seeing. Implicit in this logic is an intention to get
you-name-it to look like *something* photographed. These steps can include,
but are not limited to, what Sutherland (2016) described as a range of ap-
proaches—or attitudes—in his comparison of the documentary character
of Clark's ethical ambivalence in *Tulsa* or Richards' humanistic empathy in
Cocaine True Cocaine Blue, to name two examples. In both instances, neither
Clark nor Richards merely reduced the world to two dimensions and then
added equivocation, in the former, or pathos, in the latter. Theirs are acts of
photographic reduction—from everything possible to what can be seen
and thought in particular—which necessitates and follows all steps in the
process of crafting the image—from picking up a camera, to scouting
locations, to framing in the viewfinder, to developing, to reviewing contact
sheets, to print, and to every micro-step in between. Clark and Richards
shared the conviction—or the meaningfulness of a commitment to what
the photo essayists decide to depict in photographs—that *something* rather
than *everything* counts towards the production of a visual effect.

Committing to *something* rather than *everything*
relates to design research in general and bears asking the question of acts
of acknowledgement. For example, in a project that integrates image-
driven design research and documentary photography, Helga Aichmaier
(2018) asked, "What kind of strategies in the design process cause an im-
age to emerge that is 'perceived' as documentation" (p. 75)? In her article,
Aichmaier (2018) proceeded to interrogate various image configurations,
as she deployed various optical and design techniques commensurate
with what she referred to as "the design process of photographs" (p. 90).
Aichmaier's (2018) examination of the design of visual effects necessary for a
beholder to see photographs as documentary pictures focused on four pub-
lic squares in Switzerland and Austria. In her research, the representation of
the specificity of place became a search for an optical standpoint external
to the virtual image frame. Each of the many iterations of optical standpoint
marks a transition from one perspectival order to another. And each step
potentially affirms or negates *something*, thereby edging away from or edg-
ing toward significance.

In this example, what counts as an act of picking
out the just-right instance of "documentation" can only be evaluated retro-
spectively. If, however, an image-led research strategy allows consequence
of placement to be granted relevance retrospectively, then it does so
through a process of redesign or re-inscription in order to "foster an image
of an 'objective' documentation" (Aichmaier, 2018, p. 90). What counts as
"just right" (by whatever criteria) has to do with evaluating how something—
here, Haustellate Linz—will look designed as a photograph, such that its

documentality can be distinguished from its mere photographically record-
ing a scene. Techniques of image-led investigation, as Sutherland (2016)
observed of the photo essayist, surpass instances of "the world as everybody
sees it," yet still rely on a set of acknowledged practices of visual communica-
tion. In the case of Aichmaier's (2018) project, the designer who constructs
or designs documentation (she also said "objectivity" and "facticious") *ex
post facto* attends to her process (as inheritance, legacy, convention, style
of reasoning, etc.). The fascinating thing about Aichmaier's (2018) designed
photographs is that the photographic artifact must rigorously organize
the relation between what can be seen in them—how documentation ap-
pears, for example—and what interpretive capacities or skills the designer
presumes that the beholder possesses so as to perceive "documentation" in
a photograph. As is the case with acknowledgment (in the sense that I use
the term here), even when designed, the photograph risks communicative
misfire in not bringing about a specific effect for a beholder. Following a
research protocol does not ensure a felicitous result. The research protocol
is tacitly built on conventions that the visual communications designer has
mastered, which in consciously or unconsciously deploying these conven-
tions takes a step towards an affirmative response. But, there is no guaran-
tee that the desired result will transpire, even when adhering to the most
obvious conventions of visual communications design.

      In the spring 2020 issue of *ViAR*, newly installed
co-editors Sadre-Orafai and McDonald inaugurated a redesign of the entire
journal. Referring to their predecessors Chio and Cox's "The Page" as an
influence, the revised design of the journal, Sadre-Orafai and McDonald
explained, prioritized flexible layout and dynamic organization to "acti-
vate the page—or better, spread—in more engaging, theory-driven ways"
(Sadre-Orafai & McDonald, 2020, p. 5). The redesign of the journal also
registers changes in the field (Sadre-Orafai & McDonald, 2020, p. 6). The
material presentation of the *ViAR* reflects the journal's adoption of editorial
best practices to "ensure ethical and accurate representation of Indigenous
voices and knowledge in the journal" (Sadre-Orafai & McDonald, 2020, p. 4).
In both the 2016 and 2020 initiatives, all four editors tacitly acknowledge
that the history of the anthropological journal, originally established as an
organ of the "anthropological society," is a history of the contested space of
the page. Western conventions of academic journal design as an activity of
discursive and material framing produces the anthropological subject *on*
the page, and *in* the world (in other words, they represent that subject from
an occidental, colonialist perspective). The editors of *ViAR* understand that
design can be a means to contest the epistemological restraints of histori-
cal editorial conventions in anthropology journals and monographs. Such
an understanding of visual communications design can be traced to Robin
Kinross (1985), who points out that so-called "neutral" design approaches
are permeated with conceptual biases. In this sense, "neutral" design does

Visible
Language

55 · 3

Michael J. Golec
*Empathic Projections: Visual Anthropology,
Design, and Acknowledgement*

not necessarily invite a multiplicity of voices and points of view; rather, it imposes a European modernist moral understanding of the world. Past approaches to the design of anthropological journals—*VAR* included—imposed a vastly too-reductive model of representing the manifold of concepts that can be deployed in thinking about the world and about our lives.

Reframing, redesigning, and realigning, as Sadre-Orafai and McDonald (2020) proposed, are three combined strategies that create new options for the visual anthropologist and the photo essay, and for anthropology more generally understood. I might suggest, however, a slight adjustment to the order: redesign, reframe, and realign. I place "redesign" first, because *redesigning* the research protocols of ethnographic study directly impacts the redesign of the photo essay, and the subsequent *reframing* of that body of work in the pages of the journal. (Recall what I take Sutherland to indicate in his account of Clark and Richards. Neither photo essayist merely reduces the world to two dimensions only to insert—or add—ambivalence or empathy.) The redesign of the journal reframes visual anthropology as a research practice by not imposing a single model of rational unity on all cases, and thus promotes suppleness that results in realignments with the academic field of anthropology.

Realignment follows from a redesign of the research project. As an integral component of their visual research for "Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19," Feldman and Pérez invited their research participants to guide them in constructing the circumstances under which they could photograph the scenes included in their study. Additionally, research participants provided input into the images that were produced as part of the interview process. Therefore, the ethnographers and the research participants negotiated compositional choices regarding standpoint, distance, and visual angle (to name a few possible topics of conversation). The distinctive views made available to beholders exceed the ordinary or conventional. The goal was to evoke what the ethnographers referred to as "improvisational waiting." As Feldman and Pérez explain, the joining of the two concepts into a single theme "emphasized the creative energies that can emerge under constraining circumstances" (Feldman & Peréz, 2020, p. 384). The concept of "improvisational waiting," as I understand it, describes a way of regaining personhood within a bureaucratic system, and to exist creatively within the temporal experience of just getting through to the other side of mind-numbing boredom.

Of the ten photographs that appear in the essay, one is particularly instructive [see Figure 1 below]. It's the opening photograph, depicting a near vacant Main Street in downtown Memphis.

Figure 1.

Page layout with introductory photograph of a near vacant Main Street, Memphis. Raisa Feldman, L. & Vicente Pérez, M. (2020). Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19. *Visual Anthropology Review 36*(2), 379.

A light-rail line runs through the center of the photograph. Because human presence is evacuated from the foreground of scene, the photograph compels the beholder to look with great care for signs of life, following the lines inscribed by the rails to the vanishing point of the picture. This makes it possible to glimpse three pedestrians walking in different directions in the background. The caption below the image explains that prior to the shelter-in-place order, this had been a bustling thoroughfare, populated by crowds of tourists and locals, which include members of Memphis' homeless community. In a process of reframing the beholder's gaze, the design of this photograph defeats conventions of perspectival order, where in viewing the scene, the beholder is located at a distance from the picture plane, which approximates the distance of the picture plane to the vanishing point. This compositional strategy situates the beholder just at (or up against) the picture plane. In turn, the organization of the picture virtualizes the beholder's proximity to a public transit stop on right-hand side, which prominently features a sign that reads, "The station is temporarily closed." Just above and to the right there is a smaller sticker, with a graphic representation of a trolly and the instruction, "No loitering."

In short, the image projects a standpoint from which the beholder is solicited to see *something* she otherwise wouldn't ordinarily attend. The beholder finds herself the implicit addressee of both signs in the photograph. No train will stop for passengers here. *The beholder waits*. Yet, there is a prohibition on waiting in this space, one that is enforced both by the city transit authority *and optically framed by pictorial composition*. Officially, *the beholder loiters*. The beholder's conversion of a state of waiting to a state of loitering (and *vice versa*) is the picture's literal and figurative standpoint—imaginatively, waiting is a reality that the beholder acknowledges in their attentive viewing. Here on this spot and in this line

of vision, she is virtually situated. Standing here, she is offered a choice to move on, not necessarily to move off the track (although the choice is there) since the station is closed, but a choice to take a next step and turn the page. This is an instance of the photo essay confronting the beholder with the issue of intention vis-á-vis "improvisational waiting." By establishing "improvisational waiting" as an intentional act at the opening of the photo-essay, Feldman and Pérez (2020) signaled a theme that is recognizable throughout the entire research project—a theme that can be acknowledged or dismissed. Furthermore, as if to anticipate the beolder's recalcitrance or inability to be moved to acknowledge what the photo essay shows, the structure of the introductory photography extends throughout the photo essay by way of the layout [see Figure 2].

Figure 2.

Two-page layout. Raisa Feldman, L. & Vicente Pérez, M. (2020). Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19. *Visual Anthropology Review 36*(2), 386–387.

The single column of text approximates the near verticality of rails running along Main Street seen in the introductory photograph, and the placement of the nine remaining photographs approximates the signs posted at the transit station. Importantly, the sequence of photographs that reveal research participants' daily acts of "improvisational waiting" supplant the prohibitory orders of the signs. Waiting here can be construed as a tentative or a provisional act, however. The nine photographs that depict Feldman and Pérez's (2020) research participants place the women in the photographs between signs of administrative authority and whatever (unseen) official enforcements remain after the shelter-in-place order is rescinded. Improvisation is fraught with risk; thus, improvisational acts are always provisional.

The combined efforts of the ethnographers and the research participants, by designing the *look* of intention photographed, achieve a great deal more than exemplifying the former's conceptual frame in the photo essay. Their research approach in using photography as an ethnographic research tool, as I see it, is *not* to bring about the look of "improvisational waiting," since that might result in making the image conform to the theory, or, what Pierre Bourdieu called, an "anthropological fallacy." Rather, as I claim above, their achievement is showing how waiting can be understood as being an intentional act. In doing so, Feldman and Pérez (2020) urged beholders of the photo essay to see this as awesome and astonishing in its possibility (an insight shared between ethnographers and their research participants), rather than as always constituting an instance of bureaucratic control. From what I can see, this collaboration establishes a criterion to judge what counts as the just right photographic *look* such that the intentional nature of "improvisational waiting" can be distinguished from a merely photographic record of waiting in a non-improvisational or non-intentional sense.

Part of the process of highlighting what there is to see in the photographs is for the photo essayist to adopt a strategy in the design of the photo essay that prohibits, to whatever extent possible, a concept from obscuring a shared conviction that *something* should show up other than, or in addition to, an image that is perceived as merely a documentation of a preconceived ethnographic theory. By "shared conviction," I mean to emphasize not only collaborative fieldwork, but also supporting acts that organize the research materials—photographs and text—onto the pages of *VAR*. In other words, design counts in a shared conviction that exists in the field (where the photo essayist conducts research) and out of the field (where the photo essayist organizes research for publication). Co-editor Stephanie Sadre-Orafai worked closely with Feldman and Peréz to achieve an installment of "The Page" that was both in keeping with the authors' ambition and with the remit of *VAR*'s editorial policy. Working within a flexible layout, Feldman and Peréz, with the assistance of Sadre-Orafai, structured the appearance of *something* in their photo essay that may very well be "theory driven," but is not theory laden such that the conceptual framing of the project obscures those who participated in their field research. The collaborative process of refinement—that is, how design can make *something* appear—reckons with significance or meaningfulness in the specificity of something photographed (or depicted, in general). Design can further the location of meaning as something in particular, which can show up and engage a beholder's capacity for acknowledgement in her response to the *look* of *something* designed.

At the beginning of this essay, I asked: How does the photo essay—and relatedly, the photograph—in its *looks* contend with the possibility of a resistance to acknowledging the reality it depicts? I

Visible
Language

55 · 3

Michael J. Golec
*Empathic Projections: Visual Anthropology,
Design, and Acknowledgement*

briefly discussed Sutherland's (2016) article "The photo essay," exploring his suggestion that the photo essayist endeavors to work toward the production of a visual effect that results in the look of *something* photographed. I then touched on Aichmaier's (2018) interrogation of various strategies in the design of photographs that, as she put it, can be perceived as "documentation." In my final example, I took up the case of Feldman and Pérez's (2020) "Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19." Here I proposed that the ethnographers and the editors of *VAR* showed how waiting can be seen as being intentional. And they achieved this, as McDonald and Sadre-Orafai (2020) wrote, by taking up the challenge set by an ethnographic ideal of focusing on "both empathy and care for those with whom we [anthropologists] live, work, and come to know through embedded field engagements" (p. 206). This is, I claim, what the intentionality of "improvisational waiting" *looks* like photographed. In all three examples, I posit that there is, in the design of the photo essay, an implicit logic of averting or embracing acknowledgement, or the recognition of something otherwise unthought or not deemed worthy of attention. Confronting this entails that the photo essayist, the visual communications designer, and the visual anthropologist are embroiled in negotiations with whether they and their audiences are willing and able to see what the photo essay shows, *or not*. This can't be known *a priori*, as if there is a prescribed method to follow that will ensure acknowledgement. Overcoming an aversion to what the photo essay shows—its reality—is a problem that must be faced in each specific instance. As I propose above, while the design of a photo essay may predict disinclination, recalcitrance, or disinterest, there is no assurance that its design will successfully overcome these obstacles.

Figures.

Fig. 1. Raisa Feldman, L. & Vicente Pérez, M. (2020). Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19. *Visual Anthropology Review 36*(2), 379.

Fig 2. Raisa Feldman, L. & Vicente Pérez, M. (2020). Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19. *Visual Anthropology Review 36*(2), 386–387.

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Visible
Language

55 · 3

Michael J. Golec

*Empathic Projections: Visual Anthropology,
Design, and Acknowledgement*

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