

This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced PDF of a commissioned essay accepted for publication in the exhibition catalogue, *Beyond Surface and Material: Considering the Relationship between Textiles and Photography*.

Information about the exhibition can be found here:

[http://www.ragm.co.uk/site/scripts/documents\\_info.php?categoryID=1&documentID=5](http://www.ragm.co.uk/site/scripts/documents_info.php?categoryID=1&documentID=5)

Full details of the published version:

Annebella Pollen, 'Touch Screen: Feeling and Seeing in Photography and Textiles', in Marlene Little (ed.), *Beyond Surface and Material: Considering the Relationship between Textiles and Photography* (Rugby Art Gallery and Museum, UK), pp. 41-43. ISBN 9780955082979

## **Touch Screen: Feeling and seeing in photography and textiles**

### **Annebella Pollen**

How might the seemingly divergent, even antithetical forms of photography and textiles be reconciled? The former may seem to be largely a visual medium, the latter tactile; one is commonly perceived to be two-dimensional, the other as 3D; one is usually apprehended as a cool, smooth surface plane, while the other is seen as warm, deep and textured; the first appears rooted in technology while the last owes more to traditions of craft.

One way to move beyond these artificial and superficial divisions is to consider each as material process with shared characteristics and affordances. Material ways of thinking open up new ways of challenging the borders between seemingly disparate things. As scholars have argued, a material engagement with photography requires a shift from thinking of photographic images as metaphorical windows we simply look through, to an understanding that photographs are sensual and even embodied objects with particular material qualities that fundamentally shape our understanding of their meaning.<sup>1</sup>

Photography's reality effect can be so persuasive that we rarely consider its physical dimensions, instead seeing photographs as merely synonymous with the subjects they depict. The forms through which photographs are presented and the haptic ways in which we apprehend their messages are nevertheless materially significant.

A material engagement with photography involves an investigation of what is done with photographs as well as how they look and feel. They may be lovingly framed or ruthlessly torn up, encased in a locket or enlarged on screens, hidden in shoeboxes or displayed in museums. Even in their digital formations, we pass them around on our devices, swipe them on touch screens or linger over them with the pointing finger of the cursor's hand-shaped icon. Thinking of photographs as physical forms brings them closer to the realm of textiles;

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (eds.) *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (Routledge, 2004); Elizabeth Edwards, "Thinking Photography beyond the Visual?" in J. J. Long, Andrea Noble and Edward Welch (eds.) *Photography: Theoretical Snapshots* (Routledge, 2009); Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2004).

their shared materiality allows for more similarities than difference: they are both inherently tactile. While a number of metaphorical parallels can be drawn between the detail of stitch, grain and pixel, and the shared history of early computing and jacquard weaving is well documented, material ways of thinking about photographs also allow for new interdisciplinary intersections.

Photographs ever were mixed media. Daguerrotypes, for example, as one of the earliest forms of photographs, needed to be held in the hand and tilted to the light in order for the image to be fully revealed. Haptic visuality as a sensual mode of seeing may have been recently developed as an analytical category through the film theory of Laura U. Marks,<sup>2</sup> but a mode of engagement that linked touching to seeing was present from photography's very start. Early photographs, in all of their diverse material variety, might include nitrates, tin, egg, silver, glass, paper, leather, velvet, gilding and thermoplastic among their component ingredients. The technology used to produce them had its own material origins in mahogany and brass, not to mention the less tangible properties of darkness and light. Photography has long been argued, at least in its analogue form, to be bound up with touch: the same light that touches the sitter touches the photographic chemicals on the plate, print or film, making photographs into indexes of objects and persons, more like traces, relics and imprints than simple iconic copies.

Later in the nineteenth century, with the growth of image production, photographs would be popularly printed on mirrors, mounted on pin cushions, framed in hair jewellery, decoupage onto furniture and inlaid into marquetry in ways that blur categories and typologies between photography and decorative art.<sup>3</sup> Even in their most familiar form in the Victorian family album, photographs could be trimmed, annotated, painted and mounted, perhaps next to dried flowers or a lock of hair, even, in some cases, in radical collage presentations that long predate the avant-garde montages of Dada.<sup>4</sup> In the context of these parlour crafts, there was no structural distinction between photography and other decorative media, and these eclectic and inclusive forms of engagement create historical links to the contemporary artists and makers who challenge hierarchies between materials and merrily blur genres.

The status of photographs as both image and object parallels other aspects of their multiple identities, where they can straddle truth and illusion, presence and absence. Photographs inhabit a special condition whereby they can be simultaneously ubiquitous and singularly striking; at once banal and extraordinary. They can alternately idealise, obfuscate or cruelly reveal. These complexities and contradictions make them rich material sources for makers. As supreme memory objects, both photographs and textiles can be used to explore issues of

---

<sup>2</sup> Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002)

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Daile Kaplan, *Pop Photographica: Photography's Objects in Everyday Life 1842-1969* (Art Gallery of Ontario, 2003)

<sup>4</sup> Patrizia di Bello, *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England: Ladies, Mothers and Flirts* (Ashgate, 2007)

time and emotion. As means of getting closer to one's object of study, photographs provide an opportunity to think through detail and framing: they can unlock every loop and thread of fabric, dramatise every slub and stain. Perhaps most provocatively, textiles can be used to intervene in photographs, puncturing surface illusions through splicing or embroidery, subverting or embellishing the projected message. Such intersections allow for dynamic forms of material exchange that move photography beyond its pragmatic function as a maker's tool for recording process and results, and into a way of thinking; one that merges media, braids disciplines and weaves together modes of apprehension to create hybrid objects that unite the senses.