

BOOK REVIEWS

Elizabeth Edwards, *Photographs and the Practice of History: A Short Primer* (London, New York, Dublin: Bloomsbury, 2021), 176 pp., ISBN 9781350120658.

Upon receipt of your copy of *Photographs and the Practice of History*, I encourage you to first read the bibliographic afterword and peruse through the section titled ‘Selected Reading’ of the book before delving into its substantive chapters. This is because while Elizabeth Edwards refers to her publication as a short primer, scholars of photography, visual history and visual culture will recognise it as a culmination of not only her oeuvre at a theoretical level, but also a filtering, a synthesis and meditation on key debates that have characterised critical literature on photography and the philosophy of history in the recent past, presented in a most succinct fashion that is characteristic of the author’s deceptive ease. Both the bibliographic afterword and the subsequent selected reading list at the end are a testament to this effort to coalesce and think through this past scholarship. In the preface, Edwards notes that while she hopes historians of photography and visual historians will find it interesting, the book ‘is for students, the discipline’s new generations, who are starting to think with photographs within historical studies’ (p. x). *Photographs and the Practice of History* combines pertinent engagement with ease of access thus making it an excellent resource for such readers.

At the same time, Edwards’s intention is to turn the lens on the discipline of history itself by challenging us to consider how photography has indeed informed the very practice of history, with or without images. The overriding questions are: What do photographs do to history? What disturbances do they cause? These are considered through eight concepts which in turn constitute the respective eight short essays of the book: inscription, distance, scale, event, presence, context, materiality, and the digital. These concepts are easily recognisable as qualities that inform both the material production of and theoretical engagement with photographs. Equally, they signal the acknowledged and unacknowledged precepts that inform much of historical practice. Edwards’ book is thus a historiographical intervention, an invitation to *all* historians to consider in turn how photographs may expand and trouble the discipline by considering their potential to disturb.

It is perhaps not by coincidence that the first essay focuses on inscription, a term that has connotations to text. Archival documents have arguably, been the bastion of historical practice. The burgeoning of literature that critiques the archives is a

testament to this.¹ Photographs are also marked by inscription. Thus, she notes that photographs challenge the notion of already-given inscriptions through their excessive and unruly qualities and their capacity to include random inscriptions. This is elaborated further in the third essay on scale. The minutiae of photographs offer an abundance in inscriptions which have the capacity to 'refigure, complicate and move forward our historical questions and assumptions about what we think we already know' (p.45). The malleability of scale in photographs means we are confronted with the desire of revelation and the practices that inform such an exercise. This in turn challenges assumptions about detachment and certainty and asks us to consider the extent to which all historical writing is 'a chancy game perhaps hanging delicately on ideas of survival, causation and consequence as it builds its accounts' (p. 22).

Historians, by and large, may have rested on detachment and distance from their source material – indeed the discipline is founded on that which presumably no longer exists – but photographs in turn disturb temporal distances. This is the focus of the essay on distance. We are invited to trouble linear configurations of time in historical practice, a quality already embedded in photographs in their capacity to 'allow the past to seep into the present in ways that well up and leak through time and space' (p. 29). Additionally, 'photographs also assign a past to the future in that the present becoming past is inscribed from an imagined future' (p. 40). I am reminded of David Scott's own critique of linear temporality in *Omens of Adversity*² especially when expressed as revolutionary time which looks forward to an imagined (transcendental) future. Arguably, a past marked by conflict remains an overwhelming concern for historical inquiry. Indeed, my own department remains invested in teaching about revolutions, from slave rebellions to anti-apartheid activism in the recent past. What might it mean then to introduce photographs to such courses as a way of complicating revolutionary time? Additionally, if distance has been the condition of knowing, Edwards asks us what might it mean for historical practice if we are attentive to these temporal slippages?

Crucially, if archives have been the resource through which the above concepts find expression in historical practice, this effort has hinged on the notion of history as event. Rather than consider the historical event as a 'discrete, comprehensible even graspable happening within the flow of time' (p. 58), Edwards challenges us to consider how the event may be constituted through the historian's effort to endow a happening with significance and strategies of emplotment. I am reminded here of Patricia Hayes' essay whereby she cites the Afrapix photographer Gideon Mendel's account of his search for the historical event with his camera in apartheid-era South Africa:

1 See for example A. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009); C. Hamilton and N. Leibhammer, *Tribing and Untribing the Archive: Identity and Material Record in Southern KwaZulu-Natal in the Late Independent and Colonial Periods* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2016).

2 D. Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

...if I look back at the last few years of the 80s, I found I was much too hooked on news situations and whenever there was a protest or a march, I felt I had to go and photograph just in case something dramatic happened. It was a real waste of film...I just got too many funeral and protest.³

Mendel's actions as a photographer embody the effort of the historian to discern the event from the non-event, in turn construing the former as such through the camera. While the complete monograph may present 'a sober demeanor and pursuit of certainty' (p. 22), photography has the potential to allow for fragmentation and opening in ways that are less dependent on a coherent event. Importantly, this is not a negation nor annihilation of real actors, a concern of the essay on presence. In this section, Edwards again sees value in the photograph's inconspicuous details to point towards the existence of a 'sentient, social being' (p. 72).

Like the 'event', 'context' has arguably been one of the discipline's cornerstones. If the historical event emerges in part through historical practice, so too does context. Edwards makes a persuasive argument for how content can easily slip into a given and stable context as foundation to read inscription. But this comes at a cost. In my own writing on photographs over the last ten years within the discipline, I have first-hand experience of the constraints felt when making sense of photographs within prescribed contexts, often 'colonial', 'apartheid', even 'African'. If you are a reader of critical scholarship in photography, chances are you have come across similar scholarship, or may have even contributed to such. And why not? Working with a seemingly coherent and containing context makes for arguments that gain easy acceptance in the discipline. Yet, Didi-Huberman's fierce critique of historians as lazy in their engagement with photographs haunts me.⁴ Recall that Edwards' concern in *Photographs and the Practice of History* is to encourage historians to expand their practice. One way of doing so – which may in turn assuage the angst arising from Didi-Huberman's accusation – is to allow for contextual flexibility by considering how photographs can in turn generate contexts instead.

Returning to the archive, it is not uncommon to encounter documents assembled in ways that may not only be suggestive of already-inscribed events and context, but also generative of historical narratives through their physical organisation. Edwards thus draws attention to the materiality of photographs to ask questions about the discipline's relationship with material culture. Photographs have the capacity to take on different material forms and to circulate across different locations, challenging thus the grids of intelligibility inscribed by archival processes. This is heightened in the digital era, a focus of the last essay in the book. Indeed, she demonstrates clearly

3 P. Hayes, 'Unity and Struggle: Afrapix and the Sedimenting of Photography' in O. Enwezor and R. Bester (eds.), *Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life* (New York: Prestel, 2013), 346.

4 G. Didi-Huberman, *Uprisings* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016). Didi-Huberman addresses the failure of academics to engage photographs taken in Auschwitz in their totality, including the seemingly legible material aspects. He makes a powerful argument for how the forms of epistemic erasure that such a dismissal can engender, which is precisely what underpinned the Nazi regime.

how in some ways the circulation of photographs in the digital sphere allows them to demonstrate precisely the issues raised regarding excess in inscription, the capacity to unsettle spatial and temporal distances, malleability of scale, the disruption of the pre-existing event and context, the deployment of photographs to assert existence or presence and the capacity to intervene in their materiality. In other words, what the digital era enables is precisely what photographs have been doing for some time. More importantly, perhaps, the essay also warns about how equally the digital turn can enable a return to a conservative relationship with history precisely through photographs' 'free floating assemblages' (p. 115) on the internet.

Scholars who are familiar with Edwards' work often appreciate the rich engagement with bodies of photographic archives that she has demonstrated. In *Photographs and the Practice of History*, specific photographs are included between essays in an elliptic fashion to signal and encapsulate theoretical points raised in the writing, but without commentary. And for this she draws from an array of photographic collections. A book such as this that is invested in disciplinary reflection does not offer the luxury of substantive and textured visual analysis, thus I would strongly recommend readers to consider this as an accompaniment when working with specific images or archives. Here the notion of primer takes on a double meaning: as a guide in the process of navigating new intellectual terrain about photography and history but also a compound applied to a new surface that enhances absorption of subsequent compounds. The primer becomes an essential unobtrusive layer that performs heavy duties whose presence and significance is easy to belie. Such is the nature of Edwards' publication in its twin characteristics of simplicity and overwhelming essentialness.

Edwards writes that photographs are 'history's other, a negative perhaps, or raw material of the discipline' (p. 25). I read *Photographs and the Practice of History* as an invitation to pause and consider characteristics that have informed historical studies which remain cast out, characteristics that are embedded in photographs which in turn have the capacity to revitalise the discipline. As she notes in the introductory pages, historians have already been inhabiting the photographic world anyway.

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