First published in "A Fractured North – Journeys on Hold," edited by Erich Kasten, Igor Krupnik, Gail Fondahl 2024: 73 – 89. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien. — *Electronic edition for* dh-north.org

4 WITHDRAWING FIELD SITES – VISUAL REAPPEARANCES

Jaroslava Panáková

Introduction

The events of the last two years have had a major impact on the ways Chukotka is positioned in the world. The border between the USA and Russia in the Bering Strait has not been officially closed yet as during the years 1948–1988. Nevertheless, there has not been any flight connection from Nome to Chukotka for two summer seasons and the Russian Yupik people have not crossed the border by boat either. Yupik relatives on both sides of the Strait are separated for now. Most of the on-site ethnographic fieldwork among Russian Yupik and Chukchi has been also postponed or discontinued, largely for the reason of self-censorship, partially because of the official travel restrictions. This is not the first time in the history of the region that such pauses and interruptions in its access have occurred.

This study advocates the idea that one way to continue our inquiries is to focus on documenting and tracing all the incoherencies and contingencies of the present time (and history) through online visual material. I suggest that despite the physical retreat from sensory everydayness (Baranov 2024), private stories still emerge online through visual traces. These are the sensual immediacies that persist (Mirzoeff 1989; Grasseni 2007). I shall demonstrate via a few cases how visual methodologies enable us to explore the current visual stories in such difficult contexts and align them with the analog home photographs collected earlier.

Siberia and the Russian Far East have offered attractive field sites to foreign scholars; there is no doubt it will remain so for decades to come. As Anderson and Arzyutov demonstrated, Siberia, "was promoted internationally as a progressive ethnographic region in its own right" (Anderson and Arzyutov 2016: 185). What effect, if any, the recent geopolitics will have on the scholarly "marginalization" of Chukotka, so distant from Europe but central to the research of the Russian Far East, is to be explored in the future. Under the circumstances, when access to the field might be restricted (or is perceived to be) but the fascination with the Siberian field tends to persist, physical contacts and first-hand reports will inevitably be replaced by fading memories or unreachable phantasies.

From my perspective, however, our scholarly fascination with Siberia and the Russian Far East cannot be reduced to the field site bound to a particular geographical

location. Nor should the current fracture from the place turn into mourning over the loss of the field or the personal connection with the field. In my view, there is a whole braid of inquiries that need to be explored; I owe answers to the communities. One strand of research relates to home photography. My field site is ever present, arising with each gaze from the shapes, colors, and surfaces of the images. The field site turns into a field sight; tundra, village, and the sea are taken into the photographs, my new fields. The already collected personal archives, although fragmentary, as well as the ongoing online conversations with our interlocutors, are the sites (and the sights) that connect us, the community and me. These sites/sights are also proof of other losses we shall mourn. I mean here the true and irretrievable losses of the local community members. This is the moment when even a thread of an online chain of messages may cease as the young man has passed away (*ushel*).

In the inquiry of visual representations, I have been always fascinated by erasures, faults, and cut-outs in the images (see Panáková 2019). The photographic absence, non-presence, or latency is not a denial but rather a telling of the story afresh (Didi-Huberman 2008); it is like a suspension of desire: provocative and captivating. All the invisibilities make the viewer see the visible differently. Even more than that, as Merleau-Ponty claims, seeing is conditioned by the absence of visible: "Rather it is the invisible of this world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this being" (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 151). In today's context, the situation turns upside down: the electronic signal traces the photography between my partner and me completely, although in a lower number of pixels (WhatsApp's application compresses the image by 70 percent if not set otherwise). The absence happens beyond the image. Physical dying is photographic mere displacement. In such a case, the image's indexical and mnemonic nature only strengthens. In the narrative "This is – *was* him!", the photographic trembling between *is* and *was* makes the image significant. No matter how incoherent or contingent the reality might be.

In my inquiry, I attempt to work concurrently with analog visual material, collected earlier in numerous households, and with online material, be it social networking sites, chat groups, or messaging applications. I aim to trace the transient present through online visual (verbal, graphic, sonic, etc.) utterances while still being grounded in the physical materiality of the visual. Such visual material prompts a question about the relation between photographs and archives. Two main analytical frames dominate the debate (Morton and Edwards 2009). One is Foucaultian: archives produce technology of rule and production of knowledge, while images serve as a reflection of the gaze and objectification. The other is a Barthes-inspired frame based on the linguistically-framed semiotics that recognizes contingency of meaning and treats photographs as archives in their own right (Morton and Edwards 2009). In this study, I will use both of these frames, first as an observer, a silent yet distressed voyeur, who continues to develop interpretations. I will also treat the online images as

archives in their own right, pointing out the process of signification in varied circumstances and frames. In the end, I will call for the third approach, one that brings to the fore Sergei Eisenstein's legacy.

One of the platforms where the visual tracking of everyday life acquires its own shapes and forms are the mobile instant messenger applications. In the North, the flexible and fluid switching between various applications, including the messenger in vk *(vkontakte)* and Telegram, is now common. More for the quality of Internet connection than security reasons (encryption), WhatsApp prevails in the conversations with those my partners with whom we share thoughts on an almost daily basis. The more sporadic contact with other interlocutors is kept through vk. The use of some Meta applications now requires changing the VPN settings, which might be limiting to some users. Those of my partners who live in a city, such as St. Petersburg or Khabarovsk, have become very competent in online presentation: one of them has become a blogger on the Telegram and owns several channels. Another one skilfully presents herself on Instagram and Facebook. In discussing visual material in this study, I consider all of these platforms, with a primary focus on WhatsApp.

WhatsApp in my experience is neither a substitute, nor a reverse to face-to-face encounters in the physical ethnographic field, but a continuation of them. As O'Hara et al. (2014) write, the quiddity of the lived experiences and felt-life enabled by this application attract its users. It is the capacity for sociation (Simmel 1908) or sociability (Licoppe and Smoreda 2005) expressed through textual and visual means that interest me in the social, moral, sensory space fostered by WhatsApp. Especially so, that, in Simmel's terms, my partners and I share neither geographical nor moral proximity. In some cases, I have never met those with who I "chat" in person; the social connection was initiated through a relative and friend, or simply because I know their home village. In these cases, I agree with the argument by Rainie and Wellman (2012) and Castells (2009) that geographical proximity is no longer a prerequisite for a social connection while moral relatedness only occurs in digital connection. The other conversations might often go against the grain of our differing moral stands; they persist, however, due to our shared personal memories, often embodied and installed in the senses and emotions.

Here experiential knowledge stems from numerous instant digital encounters, which are nonetheless a part of an ongoing relationship between researcher and partner, grounded either in the fact that we got to know each other in person at first, or that we share the same physical memory of the place and its people. If a memory of a bodily fragrance, so important in all the Yupik and Chukchi "hellos" and "goodbyes," hold our fractured presence-absence together, it also acts on the potential tensions in our communication and hinders us from ceasing it altogether. Silencing oneself is a temporal matter, as in leaving the conversation or even blocking one's telephone number; when the dust settles, we are able to meet again, not because of politeness, curiosity or necessity but because of the reminiscence of physicality. WhatsApp cre-

ates, organizes and structures patterns and orders of our social encounters, including a set of possibilities and interdictions (De Certeau 1984), rhythms and intonations of the texts, and compositions and dynamics of the images. The fact that these digital encounters are intimately bound to the real world makes them socially meaningful acts. To make digital encounters dense and substantial, it is important to trust the particularities that arise out of them. In some cases, they significantly add to my understanding the organizational principles behind the subjective experience of my partners.

My thoughts on what kind of sight the online field site offers would be more pertinent if the visual material itself were present. Throughout my work, my partners insist that our encounters, as translated into publications of various genres, cannot be and should not be anonymized. Now, however, for security reasons, I shall anonymize as much as possible. It is like tiptoeing on eggshells and I can only hope that my anthropological endeavor causes no harm to the people I am describing. As emotionally bound to Russia and Chukotka, in particular, I try to use bracketing to avoid anxiety or anger stepping into my analysis. But then my wording may be so cumbersome that what seems to be from outside "objective" writing, lacking sympathy or compassion, is my way to survive the emotional overload I live through every day. "Why exactly do you need to do this?" – in a sense of "why do you need to know," "Why do you need to feel this way" – would be my partners' usual reaction. "Because it matters, you matter" would be my response.

The cases

Transition

The extent of impact that instant messaging has on visual depiction and self-presentation is immense and is yet to be explored. Even the fragments of such inquiry point to the extent to which technology is a trigger; these are genres and visual forms but also aesthetic conventions and ways of visual thinking. Photography, before the existence of social networking sites or messaging, had offered freely interpretable notions – memory, evidence, and beauty. According to Pierre Bourdieu et al., people photograph *what* is beautiful and *because* it is beautiful; as the authors state, it is not important how much beauty is *gratified*, but whether it *pleases* (Bourdieu et al. 1990). In contrast, digital photographs in messaging apps shall be able to appeal, to attract, no matter how transient such a glance might be. The thread of messages – textual, visual, iconographic – occurs as a montage of attractions. If there is a metatheme of such montage, it is self-formation.

Below I provide an example of self-formation as framed by instant messaging. I have known this particular peer since 2014 when we met in Chukotka. We spent a quality time together, walking a lot and discussing various topics. He was very talk-

ative and often made sarcastic comments. He has always had a stand on indigeneity that differed from that of the local *intelligentsia*, but the topic evidently bothered him; he was never indifferent to such questions as "who am I?," "what is my ethnic or cultural identity?," "what is good for the local community?" He also has been articulate in criticizing my curiosity; sometimes as a joke, sometimes seriously, he could point out the drawbacks of my questions or ways of thinking. His criticism, however, was always expressed in a friendly tone.

In 2014, he had recently quit drinking alcohol, so alcoholism and the "10 steps program" were very pronounced issues in his life. He wanted to share what he found out and how it worked, so he would turn on audio stories from Alcoholics Anonymous for me. Another dominant topic of our discussions was his undertakings in arts and crafts. It seemed that my opinion on his artworks mattered to him. I asked him to take pictures of his complete works and to document his process of making art by taking a picture of each step. The ongoing political events (e.g., the annexation of Crimea) were not an issue; we touched on them only once at a family picnic. I could sense a slight tension because of the different understanding of the issue but there was nothing uncompromising in our wording, the tone of our voices, or gestures.

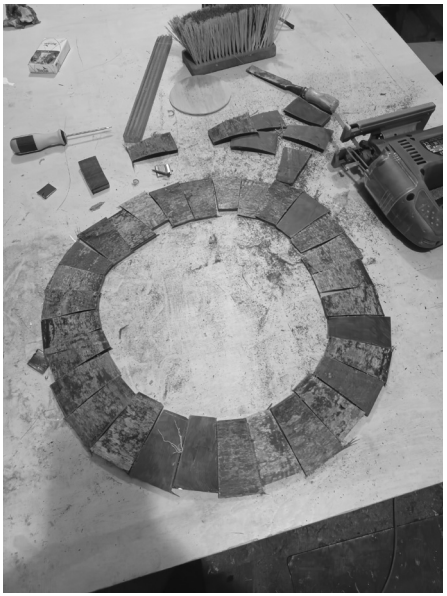

Fig. 1 The process of art making, 2024.

After my departure, our conversation continued via Messenger and later via WhatsApp. The instant messaging seems to me as a natural continuation of our conversations. Until 2022, he shared dozens of pictures of his family, hobbies, celebrations, get-togethers and community events. He continued sharing his art projects with me, often following my advice on how to document the process of making; he would also ask for hints on the models of visualization, especially when he switched to a genre unknown to him.

Messaging never produces finished stories from the pictures; he rather used them as an incentive for discussions and analyses of the people, practices, and events the pictures concern. He was performing an open-ended investigation of his self; there were even verbal hints that the process was on-going – he was always "learning about himself" through the dynamics of his life and current events. Self-formation can be individual or collective; it is possible to see how individual, communal and societal self-formations are overlapping and what comes out from their interaction.

Processes of self-formation encouraged him to adopt (and reject) different identifications; my friend's personal story of an alcoholic will surely always be pertinent but, since 2022, it has receded to the background. What came to the fore was his folk analysis of societal issues at their global, even abstract level, while he has stayed silent on how these issues might influence his everyday life. In his story, he started omitting any personal details about local male friends, not to give any information on vulnerable issues. In his view, I also changed. He would often tease me for being too curious, perhaps an almost interfering and intrusive visitor, or a "spy," but recently, he asserted, rather seriously, that I had become an enemy of his country.

Talking about his identity, he has shifted from the discussion on the extent of indigeneity in his mixed origin towards the national (not civil, however) identity. His question in 2014, "What kind of Chukchi am I and do I give shit?" gradually changed to the current self-confirming position: "I am Russian, I always have been one." On the visual level, this is manifested through a thread of family and friend's portraits and selfies that has gradually changed to a series of videos, images, and memes on political topics. His recent visual input has contained numerous propagandistic videos.

In visual terms, he could talk about the effect the images can have and what feelings or knowledge they could deliver. So, he had a complex idea of what visuality means and his use of images was conscious. Encapsulating a moment for future reflection was not a dominant part of his visual agency. Neither was he visually exploring his subjective experience through a visual display of self-fashioning. His priority was to manifest his value systems through visual representations produced and promoted by someone else.

Fig. 2 Analog photos from the home archive. When shared via WhatsApp, they are often a subject of discussion on genealogy, roots, and ancestorship, ca. 1978. This photo was sent with the words: "In the background, there is Kal'nenkovs' house. Vovka shared this photo with me something like you remember this rocket? Yes, I replied, it was a lasso for the kids' tongues [emoji face with tears of joy]... in fact, I never got caught [emoji face with tears of joy]"

Concurrently to his ethnic realization, he kept doing things *"dlia sebia,"* for himself. A part of this was actually getting to know his "roots:" as if going backward was a premise for going forward or at least being right now at the right place. He encouraged me to share with him everything I know about his ancestors. He corrected the mistakes in my notes and labeling of the photographs. The missing information often encouraged him to visit and ask elders or people who knew the local genealogies and owned the pictures. He compartmentalized his family as something that gave his life a sense – *"smysl zhizni."* In fact, even alcoholism had become an issue to be solved when his oldest brother quit first and then he decided to follow him, only to be soon joined by the rest of the family.

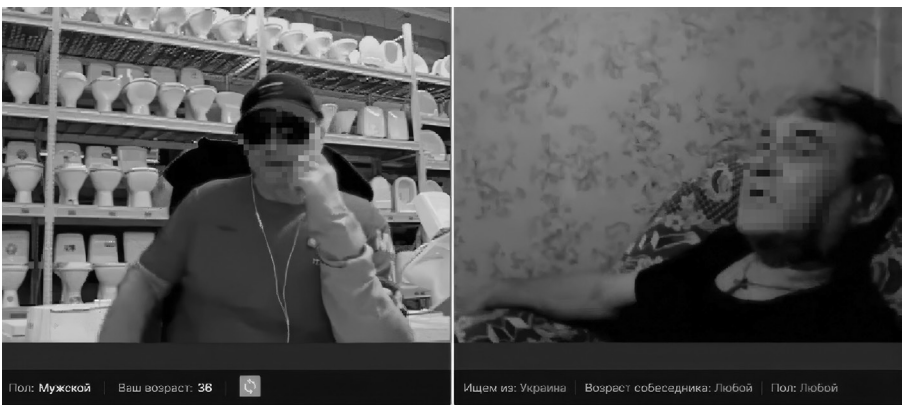

Fig. 3 Propagandistic video (print screen), 2024.

Fig. 4 (left) "I want to buy a car. This one belongs to the company," 2023.

Fig. 5 (right) Winter walk, 2023.

Fig. 6,7 In the training camp, 2023.

If self-formation is a combination of aspiration (revealing personal values) and what the surrounding context renders possible (including what the surrounding context enables individuals to imagine choosing), then what I observed was his untiring search for certain solid ground, a symbolic place outside of the Indigenous community while physically, on a day-to-day basis, staying an integral part of it. His individual choices and how he was manifesting them, are all bits and pieces of the idea of self-formation. However, the types of choices that he made were conditioned by the technological, cultural, and social circumstances that affected him.

Visual inventories of personal transitions parallel the bigger-scale transformations in collective histories. In the physical worlds, these are often cupboards in the living room that serve as "a memorial;" they include some material goods (tableware, glass, souvenirs), status certificates (diplomas, notes of thank), and of course photos arranged in such a manner as to resemble an altar or shrine. In the instant messaging apps, the thread of messages becomes also a shrine on its own: of a son's departure for college, a brother's participation in an art show, a cousin's newborn, one's own artworks, the first day on a new job. All these fragments of my friend's life events depict at the same time the "lives" of various institutions: urban migration and social lift indicate changes in demographic structure; recruitment patterns mark social control; transformation of family images points to the changes in the family unit, etc.

When analyzing my peer's analog photos from the 2010s, I could see how his personal images were entangled firstly with the local community and then with the Soviet

and post-Soviet state, facing possible challenges of individualization. Now, in 2024, focusing on our visual exchange in WhatsApp, I need to admit that the personal and individual manifestations faded into the background once again, leaving a prominent space for the "big narratives." The process of self-formation nevertheless continues. And yet, his eyes in the portraits do not look back into my eyes anymore. "The glance into the camera evokes one of the primal experiences of daily life – of look returned by look – through which we signal mutual recognition and affirm the shared experience of the moment." This look of exchange that says "*At this moment, we see ourselves through one another*" (MacDougall 1998: 100, italics added) is postponed for now. Maybe just for now…

The men over there

I have had only two chat partners who joined the army after 2022. I write to them: "Are you going over there?," that is to the front; I never name it. Every time I open our chat, with fear and trembling, the first thing I look at is their status message "last seen online." This is my way to verify if they are alive. It is naive because any recently recorded visit in their profile does not necessarily mean that they are fine. And yet such electronic confirmation seems soothing for now.

One of the chat friends is timid and careful. We never met; I simply wrote to him on vk, having many shared friends from Chukotka. He must have asked around about who I was and we began to communicate via WhatsApp. I am more than ten years older, which means he must have been in the military service when I was visiting his home community. He always responded politely, in just a few words. Our chat history contained dozens of pictures, all sent by me. His visual references were all on vk. So I read his messages on WhatsApp while looking at his images on vk, going back and forth, putting the bits and pieces together. It was my montage based on association: his departure "over there," the bond with his brother and with other guys from the village, a long wait for a vacation, a visit home, and again a departure. The images were cues for posing questions. But even here, and rightly so, he was careful. There were no images of the world "over there," neither for my eyes nor for the public eye. I wondered that if he managed to photograph anything in the trenches, what it would be, for whom, for what? He uprightly replied that "it is not allowed."

The images never taken might have told more than the hundreds of mundane snapshots shared. In the home archives of analog photographs, failing technology or insufficient competence may mean that not all the moments of our lives are captured visually, or photographically. Today, with the peculiar experience of being "over there" (in the war zone), thousands of images fail to be produced. It is a paradox of the times when digital technology and instant messaging prompt massive home photography. Anyone can be a photo reporter of one's life. The socio-political context, in contrast, hinders this capacity and restricts reporting once again to professional

reporters approved by an authority. Nevertheless, such visual silencing does not preclude memories or oral narratives. It is a positive absence in the sense that it is a state of not being present yet; not a loss or disappearance or departing. Such absence is a part of the dynamics within the center of things, of persons, of the worlds, the dynamics that characterize the experience of critical events of transition. There is a potential in it that something might be visible or visualized one day. Or that I, as a partner in a dialogue, can imagine things (within the frames of our conversation, of course). My seeing is thus conditioned by what I am not invited to see.

I exchanged messages with another chat partner, although for five months only, from the very end of March until August 2023. The conversation was not always on a day-to-day basis but it was intensive as my chat friend's life was turned upside down within a day. The thread of messages, audio files, videos and photographs that we shared are just bits and pieces of something larger; yet they also assume a story, as the messages are read, that is scrolled from up to bottom. The photographs saved on the phone are then viewed from left to right and then back, from right to left. These different readings matter. Such linear and chronological narrations turn into different perceptive geometries through associations, parallel readings, and viewing interrupted by other incoming messages.

Biographical narration performed during a common interview tends to set the condition of tension (if not of a struggle), in which partner's pursuit of coherence repeatedly collides with their realization of how contradictory their "history" is. Words (definitions) anchor the incoherence into categories, which, however, only camouflage the fact that contingency prevails. In instant messaging, images, emoji, videos, etc., make the incoherence more vivid; as iconic references they allow life, no matter how incongruous it seems, to happen again and again, every time with alteration, depending on the haptic of the finger that is scrolling. Looked at in the series, the photographs and depictions themselves are static; they do not themselves "tell a story." It would be more plausible to say that images give a short-cut to (yet imaginary) reality, which can be (but is not necessarily) narrated and semantic. The narratives are a side effect of the montage. This is where a multi-layered landscape of meanings or non-meanings, surfaces, and faces emerges. Only when writing this paper, did I come to understanding how inattentive I had been while reading the messages when receiving them. It was as if I did not allow the latent meanings to be available to my eyes. For some messages I read or viewed repeatedly, the reading was just too fast, scattered here-and-there in my daily life. In hindsight, I admit that I must have missed some words in the statements, seconds of the song, or some important details of the images. The reading-on-the-go as the messages were coming irregularly and in every which way also limited at that moment my capacity of a *bird's-eye view*.

Communication with this chat friend began on my birthday; we are both in our mid-forties. He contacted me on vk with a picture of the birthday gift. We were already connected on the vk because I had known his sister since 2001. I never met

him in person. He lived outside of Chukotka since his university studies. The last time he briefly visited his home in Chukotka was in 2013. In my response, I thanked him for his congratulations and asked how he was doing. He wrote that after the weekend he was going to the military registration and enlistment office as a volunteer. After a few messages, he suggested switching to WhatsApp, rationalizing this by its providing a better connection, as the Internet was slow.

On the same day, he sent a video of a fishing trip. It showed a walk in strong wind, on a snowy plain, with a companion and a dog. He wrote: "I went fishing on Saturday. I almost lost my fingers". I thought about how close a person in the North often is to death, standing always side by side with it. I recalled stories people told me in Chukotka, occurring repeatedly on the edge. Later he wrote to me that he would refuse to be captured or be severely harmed on the front, preferring to kill himself.

He sent me two photos of his company car, saying he desired to have one of his own. He would send me the same double depiction of the car once again later, on his last day at work before his departure. He documented every step of the military registration by sending me the application forms and authority approvals. When I asked him how he had decided to enroll, he sent me an audio file with a friend's advice on how and where to register, how to sign a one-year contract, and what remuneration was offered. The next day, he sent the song *Noch pered Rozhdestvom* (Night before Christmas) by Sektor Gaza[1] – a reference not so much to Nikolai V. Gogol as to the cancellation of the *Zaporozhian Sich* in Ukraine by Ekaterina II in 1775.

While waiting for the departure, he was listening to thematic songs, such as *Edut pacany na voinu* (The guys go to war) by Golubye berety,[2] and *V armiu poidu* (I will enroll to the army) by A. Marcinkevich and "Kabriolet" band,[3] and *Zvezda po imeni solntse* (The star called the sun) by Kino.[4] The latter choice is striking as the band is a symbol of the marginalized Leningrad rock scene of the end of the 1980s. In Chukotka, however, Kino is popular among local men born in the 1980s.

He also sent a two-minute self-portrait video created in Quik Story (GoPro), in which the photos gradually alternated and the editing transitions created different colored geometric shapes. This self-portrait included a childhood photo with his mom, a portrait from compulsory military service, individual portraits in different situations and places – against the background of a volunteer registration van, with a can of beer against the background of a river, with a rifle in the forest, with a fish-

1 *Noch pered Rozhdestvom* by Sektor Gaza. S.B.A. Records, Inc., 1994.

2 *Edut pacany na voinu* by Golubye berety, albom Posviashenie. Pop, 2005. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_6dnR6Vu-4 [accessed 20.04.2024]

3 *V armiu poidu* by A. Marcinkevich and "Kabriolet" band, Music and lyrics by Alexander Marcinkevich. Albom Nepovtorimaia. Artur Music, 2007. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HOJcfijFQo [accessed 20.04.2024]

4 *Zvezda po imeni solntse* by Kino. Vocals and lyrics by Viktor Tsoi. Albom *Zvezda po imeni solntse*. Moroz records, 1989. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MagMrsw3O4 [accessed 20.04.2024]

ing rod in the river, on a bicycle against the background of his village, in front of his house, in front of the banner of an northern all-around competition, in a restaurant. Then there was a photo series with close people – with guys at a farewell party, with a girlfriend, on a picnic, on a fishing trip, selfie images with cigarettes in front of a boat, with a bucket of local berries, with his wife lying in bed and of a cat. The video was a personal celebration of himself and his life. At the same time, it served as a farewell before going to the front. Such a genre, albeit latently, allows for the possibility of a final farewell. Especially with time, the *laudatio* for life turns into a video *valedicere*. His recent portrait followed; it would be later used in his obituary and on his tombstone.

Just after he arrived at a training camp, he sent me two portraits of himself taken at the same spot; what changed were his clothing or accessories. When looking at the series of a friend's full-body portraits, in which the same person, posture, and composition are repeated, the viewer tires of gazing at the subject. It is the changing background that catches the eye. In contrast, if the person alters the visual cues, e. g. accessories, performative act, or gesture, the attention to the person will be regained. "Being seen" in a form of observation is a "center to the fantasies of modernity" (Chaney 1996: 103).

This peer documented the events in the training camp: life in the barrack, practice, leisure time. Soon he wrote: "You can still get caught up in the war here." He explained how a few men got into a knife fight. Two days later he sent me a photograph of a man who initiated the violent confrontation and was tight with twine by his fellows. This message was accompanied by several songs, both rap and women's vocals in the love songs. He also sent his portrait strolling in the city. I wondered in a return message if the regime in the camp was rather free. He responded that it wasn't really and added: "A man, a neighbor from the next bed, killed a woman with a knife in the city. He was expelled from the army. For now, we are not allowed to go to the city."

I viewed the images of him in the city while scrolling through the news about the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam. He did not know about it. I was baffled. I experienced the same confusion when he sent me a photo of him eating watermelon while I was reading and watching the news on Prigozhin's mutiny in Rostov. He followed this news but did not refer to it in his messages at all. In a personal story, the global news, on the one hand, and the intimate life, on the other hand, were omitted. Except for two instances: before the departure, he shared a photograph of his moment with his wife. And during the training camp, unexpectedly, he forwarded a photo of a newborn's hospital bracelet. I was surprised: I did not know that his wife was expecting a baby. I immediately wondered why he had volunteered to fight at this moment of his life. He only responded that the next day another soldier in the barrack also had a daughter – and with the same first name, just a different spelling.

This account of the mixed-media fragments of my WhatsApp friend's life shows how the order is juxtaposed and at the same time builds up its dramaturgy. In an

instant, this mingling is an overwhelming performance for the recipient to follow; a bird's-eye view, however, indicates how the messages refer to each other, associate, and form their ways of narration. The emotional shower I felt when reading these messages culminated when he asked me almost casually not to tell his sister about his decision. When I asked him if he had ever told the truth to his mom, he wrote back: "Not all of it yet." Four months later he wrote: "I experienced my second birth." Eventually, I stopped receiving messages from him. Then, tragically, an anonymous messenger informed me that he had died.

The messaging thread is also a mediated representation created through framing, composition, and selection. This Whatsapp friend had chosen to send me the particular photographs (videos, texts, songs) and not others. I cannot compare the selection with the original content of the phone as the device was not returned to his widowed wife. The nature of the missing photographs is thus unknown. I might only assume why and how he made the selection. The selected photographs urge us to ask ourselves the question: Which set of people, things and places do my partners want to introduce? What part of everyday life do they prefer, which do they prefer to hide and which can't they talk about or do they not know how to talk about? How do the photographs explain the need to move a narration from selected images to topics that the friend does not initiate? Similarly, I can only assume why my friend stopped messaging (in the months before I received notice of his death). I can only attempt for a kind of visual archaeology here. The truly missing images or words constantly remind me of the fact that all the photographs and memories point to moments that have already passed.

The messages of different origins and qualities constitute the pieces of a sensory mosaic; although inserted between the words by their author, I try to look at them parallel to the words, alongside them, and without the words. I prioritize them for now, only to remember that they are part of a broader sensory experience, in which the hierarchy of one sense to another is transient, or can differ (Howes 1991). While looking at the portraits of my partners on the trips to the tundra photographed by them or myself, I can relate to the photographs even haptically and through olfaction. I have a personal experience of the tundra. I can remember what it looks like, how it smells, and what surfaces feel like. On the contrary, the photographs of a military training camp are given to me rather as visual percepts. I touched a firearm only once in my lifetime, during a presentation by the military at my primary school; I barely stroked it, just to know if it felt like iron. I can imagine the stench of the military bunk beds, stale air, men's sweat, and scattered clothes. But this is just my sensory imagery.

The visual representations of the everyday-like moments tend to refer to the quotidian as usual, but it is not. The visual cues are cunning. I have to resist them, to acknowledge that this is not a photo series of a trip or vacation. Othering arises due to the explicit representations of a firearm or the barrack. But even such images might be "spoiled," such as the image of my WhatsApp friend as a soldier with a firearm

but scantily dressed and in flip-flops. I ask myself: What visual cues do these photographs prompt? Do they navigate across the fragment of this personal biography to something broader, beyond one person's life? How do these tiny archives produce knowledge of our times? What shall be remembered and how?

The visual and textual fragments are full of desires for re-presentation. Due to the displacement from the referent (Barthes 1981), they can detach themselves from their original context or object and take on new meanings or interpretations. Beside *studium* (Barthes 1981), images acquire multiple layers of meaning. With their multivalency (Morton and Edwards 2009), not only do photographs undermine the formal narratives dictated by the authorities and "refuse to participate in the production of history" (Campbell 2014: 208), but they also disrupt "everyday consensus." Every time I look at my deceased friend's images, they are different. Even his very personal, intimate images exist in context(s). Yet their meanings may not be immediately apparent.

This latency resonates with absence, non-presence, and re-appearance once the context is changed by the subject's passing. The not-being is the very essence of any photograph (Barthes 1981); we are eyewitnesses to a subject that only has been. Now this "has been" is confirmed to be "he was." My friend's images, as perceived now, do not re-present him anymore but, in Belting's words (2001), replace his absence with a new kind of presence. It is especially apparent in the many repetitive portraits in immediate succession: the same person in the same location, with one or two changing details. It is as if he were urging me to play a game "Find the difference." Or is it his effort for constant reassurance: "This is still me?"

Today, the confirmation of my friend's presence might be viewed from a different perspective: Mechanical reproduction (see Benjamin 1977), typical of photographs, provides people with testimony and memory of their existence. Subjects otherwise invisible acquire an observable form and shape through photographs. Even digital photographs are material objects and are bound to materiality; the photographs conjure a tangible presence of past moments and people (Sarkisova and Schevchenko 2023). As such, they are implicated in the work of remembering. And if any emotions of distress might occur, then – also in the work of silence (idem). It seems that some images turn "blank," that is their iconicity point to a subject who passed away and might be forgotten; the iconic sign disappears. Nevertheless, the mental image associated with the "signified" may persevere by subtle knowledge (Bohnsack 2008), embedded in other forms of memory: name, genealogy, or narrative.

Instead of a conclusion: What is next?

With the shift from the field site to a field sight, I conclude that a form of inquiry may imitate its central topic. Even if I am not physically present on the shore of the Bering Sea, I shall attempt to re-present the studied phenomenon through visual (or

other sensory) cues. Drawing on this assumption, I propose to enhance the strategy of re-presentation advanced in 1929 by Russian filmmaker, Sergei Eisenstein. He developed his idea of a *spherical book* (Eisenstein 1929), but alas, never realized it. Designed in a spatial form and made of glass, it was supposed to encourage the reader-spectator to perceive synchronically diverse concepts, assemble them, and unravel surprising associations among them. Looking through the glass, the reader could potentially recognize the unifying idea that stands behind these concepts – montage – while using the montage itself as a tool for learning about it.

In our anthropological endeavor to understand the North, we may be able to build on this idea of a "sphere." Such an invitation is tempting, considering the burden of some dichotomies still present in the ethnographies of Siberia, such as "center – periphery," "traditional – modern," and "dominant discourse – Indigenous knowledge." Instead, the "spherical" thinking includes simultaneity: everything is perceived at the same time, and everything is linked. Setting the various data side by side, layering them, and making juxtapositions may stimulate novel encounters of the textual and photographic fragments. Such reading against the grain lets new interpretative spaces emerge.

The researcher and the reader can enter an idea from any side and then link it with any other idea through the center – the method that defines all the other aspects and ideas and concentrates them around itself. The direct contact with the mixed media shared digitally enables us to recognize the indeterminacy and sensuousness of empirical reality. Moreover, it enables us to activate interpretive fields typically unacknowledged in conventional scholarly practice. In engaging with the photographs in the digital environment, I agree with Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) that fragments be treated not as ethnographic objects, validating their quality of detachment. This standpoint would assume a different positioning of us as the researchers towards the data; instead of theoretical generalizations inapplicable to concrete individuals, we are to look *through* the data. Such an approach can trace incoherent spots in grand histories while deepening the ethnography of private stories.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my partners for their courage and devotion to stay in touch with me, no matter what, and to share their stories, knowing that I do pose questions that are always too many and often too direct. *Игамсиқаюкамси! Вэлынкыкун! Спасибо!* This study was supported from public sources by the Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic and of the Slovak Academy of Sciences "VEGA" under registration number 2/0051/22.

References

Anderson, David G. and Dmitry V. Arzyutov 2016. The Construction of Soviet Ethnography and "The Peoples of Siberia." *History and Anthropology* 27(2): 183–209.

Baranov, Dmitry 2004. Answers. In *Academia Across the Borders.* E. Melnikova and Z. Vasilyeva (eds.), 30–33. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien.

Barthes, Roland 1981. *Camera Lucida.* New York: Hill and Wang.

Belting, Hans 2001. *Bild-Anthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft.* München: Fink.

Benjamin, Walter 1977. *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit.* Frankfur am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Bohnsack, Ralf 2008. The Interpretation of Pictures and the Documentary Method [64 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research,* 9 (3), Art. 26. http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114--fqs0803267 [accessed 1.042014]

Bourdieu, Pierre, Luc Boltanski, Robert Castel, Jean-Claude Chamboredon, and Dominique Schnapper 1990 [1965]. *Photography: a Middle-brow Art.* Translated by Shaun Whiteside. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Campbell, Craig 2014. *Agitating Images: Photography against History in Indigenous Siberia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Castells, Manuel 2009. *Communication Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chaney, David 1996. *Lifestyles*. London: Routledge.

Certeau, Michel de 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Didi-Huberman, Georges 2008. *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Eisenstein, Sergei 2002 [1929]. *Method.* Vol. 1. Moscow: Muzei kino, Eisenstein-centr.

Grasseni, Crisitna (ed.) 2007. *Skilled Visions. Between Apprenticeships and Standards.* EASA Series. Learning Fields, Vol. 6. New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Howes, David (ed.) 1991. *The Varieties of Sensory Experience.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara 1998. *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Licoppe, Christian, and Zbigniew Smoreda 2005. Are Social Networks Technologically Embedded? How Networks Are Changing Today With Changes in Communication Technology. *Social Networks* 27(4), 317–335.

MacDougall, David 1998. *Transcultural Cinema.* Edited and with Introduction by L. Taylor. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice 1968 [1964]. *The Visible and the Invisible.* Editor of the translated reprint: Claude Lefort. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas 1998. What is Visual Culture. In *The Visual Cultural Reader.* N. Mirzoeff (ed.), 3–13. London/New York: Routledge.

Morton, Christopher and Elizabeth Edwards (eds.) 2009. *Photography, Anthropology and History: Expanding the Frame.* Farnham/Surrey: Ashgate.

O'Hara, Kenton, Michael Massimi, Richard H. R. Harper, Simon Rubens, and Jessica Morris 2014. Everyday Dwelling with WhatsApp. In *Proceedings of the 17th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*: 1131–1143.

Panáková, Jaroslava 2019. Something like Happiness: Home Photography in the Inquiry of Lifestyles. In *Lifestyle in Siberia and the Russian North.* J.O. Habeck (ed.), 191–255. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

Rainie, Lee and Barry Wellman 2012. *Networked: the New Social Operating System*. Boston: MIT Press.

Sarkisova, Oksana and Olga Schevchenko 2023. *In Visible Presence. Soviet Afterlives in Family Photos*. Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Simmel, George 1908. *Sociology: Investigations on the Forms of Sociation*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot.

Figures

1 The process of art making, 2024. Photo: Anonymous.

2 Analog photos from the home archive. When shared via WhatsApp, they are often a subject of discussion on genealogy, roots, and ancestorship. This photo was sent with the words: "In the background, there is Kal'nenkovs' house. Vovka shared this photo with me something like you remember this rocket? Yes, I replied, it was a lasso for the kids' tongues [emoji face with tears of joy]… in fact, I never got caught [emoji face with tears of joy]," ca. 1978. Photo: Anonymous.

3 Propagandistic video (print screen), 2024. Photo: Anonymous.

4 „I want to buy a car. This one belongs to the company," 2023. Photo: Anonymous.

5 Winter walk, 2023. Photo: Anonymous.

6 In the training camp (1), 2023. Photo: Anonymous.

7 In the training camp (2), 2023. Photo: Anonymous.