"Why are you taking my picture?": Navigating the Cultural Contexts of Visual Procurement

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This paper explores how methods used to procure ethnographic visuals transition between different cultural histories and varying visual vocabularies. We use an instance during which we were detained (and the police summoned) after taking photos of an apartment building in Cairo to illustrate how these transitions can lead to unexpected and serious consequences with which ethnographers must grapple. We argue that considering factors such as geo-political context, notions of giving and receiving, boundaries between private and public, as well as a culture's historical relationship with photographic and documentary processes, are all essential to developing a critical position on visual procurement in the field.

This paper comes out of research conducted in early 2006 that focused on cultural understandings of the home (and the role of the PC in it) in 'middle-class' families (defined locally) in Egypt, Germany, South Korea, and Brazil. Among the methods used during our research was visual documentation, the practice of which became an important point of a series of discussions between us as we worked our way through these countries. This paper is structured as a conversation between the authors, and reflects our formation of an ethical, politically-situated, and culturally-aware response to the hypothetical question "Why are you taking my picture?"

JAY: …so the question of how visual ethnographers operate in the field reminds me of a quote:

> "There is a tribe, known as the ethnographic filmmakers, who believe they are invisible. They enter a room where a feast is being celebrated, or the sick cured, or the dead mourned, and though weighted down with odd machines entangled in wires, imagine they are unnoticed—or, at most, merely glanced at, quickly ignored, later forgotten" (Weinberger 1994:3).

I know a lot of visual ethnographers who might take issue with this portrayal (especially those who diligently integrate reflexivity into their work), but I think it's possible to argue that much of the practice of visual ethnography operates within the 'ruins' of subject-object relationships born out of colonialism.

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What's Going On In Here?

In the context of that history, ethnographic filmmaking began as a salvage practice. Weinberger states that "[w]here travelers had gone to collect adventures, missionaries to collect souls, anthropologists to collect data, and settlers to collect riches, filmmakers were soon setting out to collect and preserve human behaviors: the only good Indian was a filmed Indian" (Weinberger 1994:4). In these early works, visual ethnographers generally presumed that their subjects were always willing participants, drawn to the filmmaking process either out of curiosity, a way to attract attention to themselves, to improve their status, or to use it as some sort of confessional therapy.

Contemporary subjects of visual ethnographies may share some of these perspectives, but work among research participants who have some understanding of the discipline and its tools can become complex very rapidly. In my more traditional fieldwork experience in Mexico (Cooper, et al. 2004), urban Los Angeles (Meshkati, et al. 2005), and New Mexico (Hasbrouck 2000; 2004), many people gladly 'subjected' themselves to the ethnographic gaze. However, as my relationships with subjects developed, I sometimes found myself battling a set of expectations from subjects who tied my relationship with them to their impressions of anthropologists. I was the "culture guy" in whatever version they believed it to exist, which more often than not carried associations with structural-functionalism. I was to be the expert on them, "my people;" to define them, to fix the constellation of their behaviors within a closed paradigm.

In terms of ethnographic data, this dynamic can produce responses and reactions to ethnographic queries that are highly conditioned by subjects' assumptions about ethnography and its practice. For example, this occurred in my fieldwork when subjects screened information they felt wasn't relevant to the study of culture (i.e., interpersonal quarrels, etc.), or in their efforts to direct and determine the content and framing of visuals in my work. Of course, this could be interpreted as means by which some subjects exercise their influence over ethnographic practice.

Yet, there are more extreme strategies of resistance that research subjects deploy. Visweswaran (1994) reflects on her subjects' refusals to participate in her research, as well as the feelings of betrayal her work might trigger among them once she's published. My own work with the Earth Liberation Front green anarchist network concludes that silences and refusals can actually open up new spaces that allow for different discursive frameworks:

> ... my refusal to claim ELF [Earth Liberation Front] activists as 'my people' has intersected with ELF activists' refusal of the subject in ways that create a conceptual space into which we can contribute to the discourse about ELF actions and their socio-cultural significance without necessarily privileging ethnographic practice. While my contributions obviously integrate anthropological perspectives (the questions I ask, the analyses I undertake, etc.), our mutual refusal of some of the roles ordered by the traditional anthropological research paradigm can provide an opportunity for ELF activists to better control the contexts of their

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> contributions to the study, and for their contributions to be conditioned by a broader or different range of contexts (Hasbrouck 2005:31).

In addition to issues of authorship and refusal, I think it is important to recognize that visual ethnographers are politically situated in the field. Even in what might be considered relatively 'neutral' public spaces, the complexities of framing subjectivity (literally) can sometimes become painfully evident. Our recent experience in Cairo illustrates this well.

SUE: We were a team of three white American researchers and one Egyptian translator in his early 20s who had just left an ethnographic interview with a family in the Heliopolis neighborhood of Cairo at about 10PM. After spending almost three hours talking, videotaping, and taking lots of pictures with the family, two of us stayed in documentation mode as we left the building. Even though it was late, and dark out, we snapped a few pictures of the front of the building to document the structure, and add to our growing collection of images of home exteriors.

As soon as the first flash went off, an elderly woman on a balcony stood up and called down to the doorman (superintendent) of the building. The doorman summoned our translator, Mo.

JAY: While we were piling into the car, Mo was responding to a barrage of rapid-fire questions from the woman and doorman as best he could, without making much impact. After 10 minutes or so of this back and forth – during which the older woman was getting increasingly upset, Mo returned to the car and told us that he needed the consent form that the family signed so that he could show it to the building owners. "This seems reasonable enough," I thought as I dug through my pack, pulled out the document, and handed it over. He disappeared into the building with the doorman, and we began to wait. And wait, and wait, and wait.

Eventually, I decided that a little intervention was what the situation demanded. I got out of the car and proceeded to the front of the building where I was greeted by two younger men peering at me from the same balcony formerly occupied by the older woman. I explained our reason for being there, and after another 20 minutes of back and forth, interrupted occasionally by a loud street car that made communication impossible, I was told that my friend Mo was nearby making a copy of the document I gave him, and I was cordially invited to come up and wait for him. I entered the by-now-familiar building, and climbed to the first floor where I met a resident named Mohammed and his brother Ahkmed. I proceeded to review the nature of our research, our visit with the family on the third floor, and how both related to a computer company called Intel.

SUE: After some time and a great deal of confusion we all ended up back in the building, and spent about two hours in the elderly woman's apartment while a group of Egyptian men argued loudly and passionately. The argument began with a demand for "the film." We

explained there was no film, the cameras were digital. That concept was not familiar to the group and resulted in more discussion, and the absence of an easy solution to the problem.

We offered to erase the photos, but the argument had escalated and the offers were ignored. There were at least a dozen people, all men except for the two women on our research team, crowded into a small reception and dining room. Cell phones were in constant use as advice was sought and the news was spread. Other men from the building arrived to lend a hand in the drama unfolding. While most of the men argued in Arabic, two younger men flirted with the American women in English. Drinks were offered repeatedly and were kindly refused until it became clear the refusal was only making matters worse.

We sat uncomfortably listening to the prolonged and apparently heated argument, and had no way to know what constituted the main issues of the dispute. We thought, "If this is about the photos, we'll gladly erase them and go." But it became clear our presence and our photo-taking were the trigger point for an inter-building argument that might have little to do with us. The situation seemed absurd. The elderly woman had reacted strongly to us taking photos, and she seemed annoyed and maybe even alarmed by our presence in the building, but hadn't we sufficiently shown our good intentions through offering to erase the photos? Hadn't our presence and willingness to cooperate assuaged some concern about us and our activities? What was the woman so concerned about? How could we definitively convey our good intentions? While I couldn't be sure what had addled the elderly woman, I was even more perplexed by how many men had arrived at eleven o'clock at night to join the discussion. Had we become entertainment for a bored building late on a Sunday night? Why couldn't we leave? And why were they holding our translator's legal papers?

FIGURE 1 The photo that sparked "The Cairo Incident"

The father of the family we had interviewed was summoned and had to change out of his pajamas to face the angry roomful of men. Two young policemen arrived and disappeared into a bedroom with several men from the building including our study participant. Everyone in the room was using cell phones, so I took out mine and managed to get in touch with a colleague from Cairo who helped from across the city by asking a policeman friend to intervene by phone. The police in the apartment insisted that

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the events be documented on paper, and the concerned men from the building asked for business cards from everyone, and took careful notes on each of our names and business titles. Eventually the matter was settled to the satisfaction of the authorities, and we were able to regain our translator's legal papers. The evening ended as strangely as it began. We were thanked profusely for our time, and encouraged to finish our drinks. Smiles and handshakes, plus a few email addresses, were exchanged. The mood was suddenly light, and the vibe in the room changed from uncomfortable to friendly. They seemed to be saying, "We're all friends now. No hard feelings," as we finally walked out the door.

JAY: When we were in Cairo (February 2006), there was palpable political tension in the air. Between the fury over the recent publication of a cartoon depicting the Prophet Mohammed in a Danish newspaper and President Bush's continual barrage of clumsy and inflammatory statements, a nervous buzz seemed to underlie many of our interactions. On the 17th we took a trip to a major mosque in the center of the city and began to see more concrete manifestations of this tension.

SUE: Excerpts from our field notes might help put this into context:

While I didn't understand any of what the Imam was saying, his voice was obviously building in force. He reached a crescendo of passion and anger and I wondered if he was talking about Bush and Iraq (Angy—our host— later confirmed that he was). When the service was over several women came up to us and handed us sheets of paper with lists of Danish products and services we should boycott. I asked Angy if such a list exists for American products and she said yes, and it's much longer.

JAY: On another day, we were exploring Abdul Aziz street and encountered the following:

…We decided to check out an appliance store before shopping for cell phones. We enter one nearby (Angy accompanied us and translated) and are met with some stares, a little interaction in Arabic, and then some laughter. As we browse the store, he explains the various products he carries and that many of the people who buy at his shop are newly wed and looking to furnish their homes. Barbara begins to take pictures of the store, but is asked to stop. As we are exiting the store, Angy confides in us that when we first stepped in, the conversation she had with the salesperson was about our national origin. He asked if we were Danish, and when she replied "No, they're American," his response was "That's worse, but I'll talk to them anyway!"

SUE: We'll never know precisely what concerned the elderly woman and the doorman the night we were detained in Cairo. Were they alarmed by the presence of strangers in the building? Was the concern only related to the photos? Would they have stopped us as we left the building even if we hadn't taken photos? We never got a full explanation. When we asked the two young English-speaking men what was going on, they told us about "researchers" who had recently been in the news. A team of researchers had gone into an apartment building in Alexandria and asked for samples of residents' blood. All the

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residents who agreed to give blood later died. They implied that the woman (their grandmother?) found our photo-taking similarly dangerous.

While a team of any kind of researchers might have caused concern, we wondered if being a team of foreign researchers was even more alarming. During the almost three weeks we spent in Cairo the topics of George Bush, the Iraq War, and the Danish cartoons came up every day in a variety of contexts. A conversation with a teenage boy in an Internet café began with him asking us, "Are you American? Do you like Bush?" and, "Do you believe we're all terrorists?"

Anti-American and anti-Danish discourse was on TV, in the newspapers, on the Internet, in casual street conversations, and in sermons at the mosque. So, was it the photo-taking that was an issue for the woman and her neighbors? Or was it the presence of foreigners in the building during a particularly tense time in the Middle-East?

JAY: I would argue that our experience was also conditioned in some ways by a brand of visual literacy specific to the middle east. The history of photography in Egypt is linked, perhaps not surprisingly, to colonialism and Orientalism (Said 1979). It may very well be the case that suspicions about our portrayal of them as terrorists is a response rooted in a long history of negative Western portrayals of the Middle Eastern 'Other.'

Western viewers considered early photographs as the first authentic glimpses of the people, sites, and monuments of the Middle East. Until the 1870s, audiences in the West depended upon these images for their understanding of the region. In fact, most were being marketed to armchair travelers who viewed these pictures as representing the real thing. Yet many of these images were used – covertly and overtly – to advance colonial impulses in the region and Western ways of thinking about the Middle Eastern culture. For example, most of these early photographs recorded the inhabitants of the region as backward people, thereby perpetuating Western prejudices.

Western audience's assumption that photography was objective put these images beyond question, as is the case with the staged studio portrait of an old man praying. The photograph belongs to a popular genre of Muslims at prayer. Everything that was deemed perverse about Islam was distilled in Western reactions to Islamic prayer, which was seen as too ridiculous and grotesque to qualify as proper worship. The photograph positions the viewer directly before the old man in the very place of the God to whom he would be turning in worship. Evident in the image is not only the lack of respect for indigenous people that was typical of this work, but also the presumption of the photographers and Western viewers in their relationship to Eastern peoples. The old man's apparent compliance in the staging of the photograph only reinforced this presumption (Harvard University Art Museum 2000).

While it may not be possible to directly correlate our detainment in Cairo with this history, it seems likely that contemporary Egyptian understandings of the uses to which

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photography has been (and can be) put are informed by it. Even if we assume that they did not suspect us of positioning them as terrorists, it may have been the case that the Orientalist history of photography in Egypt predisposed the apartment dwellers to suspect that we were somehow exploiting them, for financial gain or other purposes. When you add to that predisposition the fact that we had not asked permission to take photos of the building from the doorman or the woman on the balcony, speculation on how these images might be used can easily run wild.

SUE: The questions, "Why are you taking my picture?" "What's the video for?" and "Am I going to be on TV?" come up all the time while doing field work. When I first started shooting documentary-style footage for design research in public spaces everyone wanted to be on camera. Working at Lollapalooza in 1994 I was constantly mobbed by kids asking, "Is this gonna be on MTV? Are you from MTV?"

In most public settings these days the camera is assumed to be a tourist device. Problems typically arise when it's being used to shoot something not typically touristy like passengers waiting for a train in the Seoul subway, or the front of a Cairo apartment building. Some of the strangest looks I've had lately were from residents of a small town in northern Germany who couldn't understand why I was shooting video of a street intersection and passing vehicles.

Bonfils Family
***Old Man Praying,* 1867-76**
Albumen print
Harvard Semitic Museum Photographic Archive, Visual Collections, Fine Arts Library

In addition, many research participants have become more jaded, and have seen enough reality TV to know that video can be used to either make them look foolish or to further their cause. In Egypt some participants seemed wary of Americans with cameras. What were we really after? One Egyptian woman we visited nervously adjusted and rearranged her hijab throughout the interview. She seemed painfully aware of the vast cultural (and class?) differences between her and us, and hyper-aware of being filmed.

By way of contrast, I once interviewed a woman in St. Louis, MO who enjoyed being on camera so much that after we took a short break and I turned the camera back on she smiled broadly and said, "And we're back with Donna." What Donna was told, but probably didn't want to believe, is that video footage and photographs shot in the field are used primarily for data analysis, design research ideation, internal communication of findings, and external presentations, conferences, and publications. No one ends up on MTV or Oprah.

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What's Going On In Here?

JAY: Because these forms of visual literacy are increasingly common, it is more crucial than ever that we integrate how our practice is perceived into our methodologies. Now that digital media facilitates the rapid transferal of portrayals that are commonly recognized as crafted depictions, our duty goes beyond the collaborative filmmaking techniques of Asch and Connor, Carpenter, or Worth and Adair (Asch and Connor 1994; Carpenter 1972; Worth and Adair 1997(1972)). As Minh-ha (Chen and Minh-ha 1994a) and Mullen (2000) have recognized, these attempts are always ultimately positioned anthropologically. They are projects initiated within the discipline's history and framework, and in the end, their authorship and structure is determined by that context, regardless of how much control the ethnographer surrenders in the process.

What we now need to address is an emerging, global visual literacy that is no longer purely receptive, but actively aware of how images are used to construct perspectives, be they aligned with the will of those portrayed or not. Issues of trust between researcher and researched become more important than ever here. As do new understandings of public and private, in which the two are increasingly blurred. One of the most common production paths in contemporary media is the opening of private lives into public arenas.

SUE: And privacy is central to the beliefs of Islam. Islamic law draws a distinction between private spaces and public spaces. In a typical Egyptian home the public space is the reception room, often called the "salon," and the dining room, and in Cairo those rooms are likely to be conjoined. These are the most formal and the only public rooms in the home. Egyptians refer to the public area of their home as "outside" and the private areas (bedrooms, kitchen, bathroom and living room) as "inside." We always started our visits in the formal salon and then were invited "inside."

There is a similar distinction in Islam between public and private dress. Most Egyptian women are "veiled" when they leave the home and go out in public, and are veiled in the public area of their own home. Clothes provide the same service as the walls of the house – they separate the private from the public.

> The link between dress...and sanctity of space is reflected in the Islamic rituals of "dressing" the Ka'ba, the center of the holy site of pilgrimage...The correspondence between the sanctuary of the Ka'ba and the home (as sanctuary) is exemplified in the measures for protection and attitudes of protectiveness in both spheres (El Guindi 1999).

JAY: I think what we're talking about here is a call for a reconsideration of how we as Westerners embody histories of documentation and photography when in the field. While this includes associations with colonialism, scientific objectification, and other forms of hegemony, it also includes new forms of media and entertainment that tend to radiate (and mutate) from the West. If Egyptian impressions of how Americans view privacy are influenced by TV shows like ***Real World*** and ***Big Brother***, we need to adapt accordingly.

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I would argue that our response as visual ethnographers should not be constructed from guilty feelings associated with Western hegemony—or some idealized attempt to (pretend to) surrender power to our research participants—but to acknowledge the increasingly global nature of these relationships. When we ***take*** any visuals, we do so under the presumption that they will benefit us as ethnographers in some way (research data, aesthetics, etc.). What we need to include in that process—even in public spaces—is an open exchange and careful consideration of the ways in which our visual subjects might perceive our work, the 'half-life' these images may have, and how research subjects may (or may not) be benefiting from their use.

This could take many forms, and is probably best managed by each visual ethnographer within the context of a given field setting. Certain obvious rules of polite filmmaking continue to apply here (Barbash and Taylor 1997), but they should be supplemented with trust-building actions that acknowledge the kinds of expectations and assumptions that participants and researchers bring to the table. Now, more than ever, this can be contextualized as a contractual engagement (be it social, informal, or literal) that has the potential to make strangers familiar from ***both*** sides of the research relationship. Some examples might include arranging photo exchanges, engaging with visual collections of research participants, involving research participants in the manipulation or electronic transfer of their image, reversing the gaze, etc. In addition, strategies like these are more likely to include research participants in ways that produce much richer ethnographic experiences than simply snapping a photo of them.

SUE: From a very practical standpoint, I think it's important not to be too casual when taking still or moving images in the field. You need to be conscious of your surroundings, and very respectful and aware of the people around you. As Tony Salvador says, "No sudden moves." The night of this incident we walked out of the building energized after a very good interview, having just snapped pictures and shot video for several hours. Perhaps a simple question to the superintendent about whether it would be alright to take photos of the outside of the building could have prevented the incident.

JAY: Regardless of strategy, we can benefit greatly from methodological planning that tries to anticipate scenarios in which our embodiment of perceptions of 'the West' impacts the ethnographic process before entering the field. This should include a consideration of how local cultural and political contexts condition the relationship between researcher and researched in ways that speak to relations of power both in the field setting and beyond. We need to ask not only how (and in what cultural contexts) images are produced, but how those images are increasingly seen as part of a global and digital network of representation that is often rife with politically-charged interpretations.

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