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STITCHING THE GAZE: MEANING AND AFFECT IN CAROLINE MCQUARRIE'S *SWERVE*

Cosiendo la mirada: Significado y afecto en *Swerve* de Caroline McQuarrie

Tecer a olhada: significação e afeto em *Swerve* de Carolina McQuarrie

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ABSTRACT:

Western art history has long been centred around sign-based readings. In the last few decades, theories of affect and embodiment have begun to challenge this ocularcentrism, bringing the spectator's body into the equation. This article will focus on New Zealand artist Caroline McQuarrie's (1975-) series *Swerve* (2009), in which McQuarrie altered vernacular photographs taken from her own family albums by stitching directly into the photographic paper, creating an interplay of thread, paper, and image. I will undertake a close reading of this work, informed by theories of family photography, craft, and affect and embodiment in other mediums, in order to investigate how these objects might be understood by reading both for meaning and for feeling.

KEYWORDS:

Embroidery, Photography, Embodiment, Affect, Spectatorship.

This article is an adaptation of the third chapter of the author's thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities at Universiteit Leiden in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Media Studies, Film and Photographic Studies. The original work was supervised by Helen Westgeest.

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RESUMEN:

Durante mucho tiempo la historia del arte occidental se ha centrado en lecturas basadas en signos. En las últimas décadas, teorías basadas en el afecto y la encarnación han comenzado a desafiar este ocularcentrismo al incluir el cuerpo del espectador como parte de la ecuación. Este artículo se centrará en la serie *Swerve* (2009) de la artista neozelandesa Caroline McQuarrie (1975-), en la que altera fotografías vernáculas tomadas de sus álbumes familiares al coser directamente en el papel fotográfico, creando un juego de hilos, papel e imagen. Realizaré una lectura de esta pieza que se nutre de algunas aproximaciones teóricas a la fotografía familiar, artesanías y la función del afecto y la encarnación en otros medios, con el fin de investigar cómo pueden ser entendidos estos objetos cuando se los lee tanto a la luz del significado como a la luz del sentimiento.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Bordado, fotografía, encarnación, afecto, espectadores.

RESUMO

A história da arte ocidental tem se centrado sempre na leitura dos signos. Nas últimas décadas, teorias de afeto e corporificação tem começado a questionar este ocularcentrismo, trazendo o corpo do espectador à discussão. Este artigo se concentra na série *Swerve* (2009) da artista neozelandesa Caroline McQuarrie (1975-), na qual a artista altera fotografias vernaculares dos álbuns da sua família, nas quais ela tece diretamente sobre o papel fotográfico para criar um jogo entre papel, fio e imagem. Eu farei uma leitura cuidadosa do trabalho, após teorias de fotografia de família, artesanato e afeto e corporificação doutros meios para, assim, pesquisar como estes objetos podem ser compreendidos numa leitura da significação e do sentido.

PALAVRAS CHAVE:

Tecido, fotografia, corporificação, afeto, espectador.

Photography is a schizophrenic medium. To say 'photography' is to invoke its myriad personalities: the holiday snapshot, the fine art print, the advertising image, the cellphone selfie, the daguerreotype, the family album, the list goes on. Each of these iterations requires a different approach from the viewer, from the hesitant cradling of the cased daguerreotype, to the ritualistic turning of the pages of the family album, to swiping right for that 'cute pic' on dating apps like Tinder. The different materialities of these photographs inform these different interactions, as the body of the viewer responds to their physicality as well as to their visual content. Broadly speaking, theories of embodied spectatorship acknowledge the role of the human body in such acts of perception. Theories of embodiment are many and diverse, citing multiple, medium specific avenues by which awareness of an embodied reaction might be triggered in the spectator. Bodies are not uncultured. As with sign-based readings, an embodied response will differ between people and objects, based on body-knowledge and past experience.

In his book *What Do Pictures Want*, W. J. T. Mitchell mentions a pedagogical exercise that involved asking art history students to each take a picture of their own mother and then gouge out the photograph's 'eyes.'¹ Mitchell references this exercise to illustrate a dual way of thinking about images, where one might see them as inert representations and yet struggle to harm the likeness of a loved one. This sheds light on the implicit significance of the act of piercing a person's image, which forms something of a trend among artists who embroider into vernacular photographs: from Maurizio Anzeri's grotesque masks² to Julie Cockburn's obscuring geometries,³ Jessica Wohl's explosions of hair-like threads,⁴ Flore Gardner's cocoons,⁵ and Stacey Page's animal masks,⁶ there is a tendency for artists to embroider over and into subjects' faces. Although each of these works has a different aim, feeling, technique, and result, the focus on, and recurrent obscurity of the subject's face draw a common thread. They all likewise refer to the relationship (or lack thereof) between artist and subject, as in each of these cases the base photograph was found rather than taken by the artist, thereby depicting people unknown to them. The anonymity of the subjects changes the intensity of the act of puncturing their images, making the process less personal. This is not the case for New Zealand artist Caroline McQuarrie's (1975-) series *Swerve* (2009), which involves the artist stitching into images from her family archives and working with depictions of her own childhood.

Swerve consists of six diptychs, each presenting types of images common to family albums of this period (1970s-80s), socio-economic background (white, middle-class), and geography (specifically New Zealand, but with parallels to other Western album conventions). *Untitled #6 (Riding)* (Img. 1) consists, on the left-hand side, of an image of a small child positioned as if driving a tractor,

1. W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 9.

2. See, for instance, Maurizio Anzeri, *Rita*, 2011, embroidery on photograph, 23.5 × 17.5 cm, London, Saatchi Gallery.

3. See, for instance, Julie Cockburn, *Troublemaker*, 2015, hand embroidery on found photograph, London, Flowers Gallery.

4. See, for instance, Jessica Wohl, *Goldface*, 2011, embroidery with gold thread on found photograph, 20.32 × 25.4 cm.

5. See, for instance, Flore Gardner, *Old Couple*, 2011, from the series "Ghosts," embroidered found photograph, 7.62 × 10.16 cm, New York, Robert Mann Gallery.

6. See, for instance, Stacey Page, *Melanie*. <https://staceypage.com/>



Image 1. Caroline McQuarrie, *Untitled #6 (Riding)* from the series *Swerve*. 2009, Digital inkjet print on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag paper, embroidery thread. Photo Courtesy of Caroline McQuarrie.

while the right-hand image shows an adult leading a horse with a slightly larger child perched on its back. The two images have been scanned from their original photographs and reprinted side-by-side on the same piece of photo-paper; they were then embroidered over as one. The embroidery takes the form of a repetitive geometric motif, with the colour of the thread changing to match those of the base photographs. These stitches extend beyond the borders of the images, onto the photo-paper substrate. Finally, a peachy coloured thread connects the three figures, stitching lines and crosses over their faces, and extending from one figure to the next, creating a physical connection which leads the viewer back and forth between the figures.

The artist's relationship with the images, and with the people depicted therein, makes the act of embroidery more personal and raises questions about the conventional nature of embroidery and photography, as well as their relationships to family and social rituals. An investigation into the avenues for embodied spectatorship opened by this series requires an unpacking of these conventions and rituals, which I will attempt to do in light of Geoffrey Batchen, Martha Langford, and Marianne Hirsch's influential texts on family and vernacular photography. The complexities of these objects require one to read for meaning as well as for affect, providing an opportunity for an investigation into the relationship between these two forms of engagement, a discussion which is in turn

facilitated by the work of Ernst van Alphen and Jill Bennett. My discussion of *Swerve* will accordingly provide an examination of the relationships between memory and embodiment, spectator identification as it pertains to another's family photographs, and the multiple temporalities at work within the series.

To understand what is specific about the experience of viewing *Swerve*, we need to start by understanding the nature of photography and embroidery as domestic practices. Hirsch, whose research on intergenerational memory in the context of trauma has been highly influential, notes that "[t]he family photo both displays the cohesion of the family and [...] is an instrument of its togetherness; it both chronicles family rituals and constitutes the prime objective of those rituals."⁷ This suggests an interdependence wherein the act of photography works both to depict family ties and also to create, enact, and strengthen them. "Not to take pictures of one's children, particularly when they are small, is," according to cultural critic Susan Sontag, "a sign of parental indifference,"⁸ which indicates a certain social pressure to take family photographs in order to signify the role of loving and attentive parent. On a similar note, Sandra L. Titus sets forward a theory of family photographs as "an occasion for family role playing"⁹ in which parents try out their familial roles and commit to parental behaviours. This commitment is further strengthened by the accountability achieved through sharing these photographs with friends and family members.¹⁰ The important social functions of photography within the family sphere rest in part on the use of systems of convention: family photo albums follow informal conventions, resulting in similarities in subjects, compositions, and poses recurring within and across albums.¹¹ Such systems of conventions have an important role in making meanings, as it is these systems that dictate how an image, work, or act should be read in a given situation.¹² Thus, the family album provides a framework of social rules, informing both the production and the consumption of the photographs within.

In *Swerve*, McQuarrie has created a limited typology of the family album, dividing her diptychs into alphabetically ordered categories: Activities, Animals, Pets, Picnics, Playground, Riding. Rather than adhering to the chronology so often present in the ordering of a family album,¹³ these diptychs combine disparate moments into one frame. An exhaustive cataloguing of the album would, of course, result in many more categories, but even with the limited scope provided by these six, we get a sense of the tropes, types, and repetition which structure family albums. Nonetheless, McQuarrie's use of these categories shows an awareness of common family album conventions, and an interest in presenting relatable examples to her audience.¹⁴

As noted, conventions are also an important aspect of craft. In a telling case study, Feminist craft theorist Rozsika Parker traces the history of embroidery in the United Kingdom and unpacks the craft's relationship to constructions of

7. Quoted in *Locating Memory: Photographic Acts*, edited by Annette Kuhn and Kirsten Emiko McAllister, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 99.

8. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 5.

9. Titus, paraphrased in Gil Pasternak, "Intimate Conflicts: Foregrounding the Radical Politics of Family Photographs," in *Photography, History, Difference*, edited by Tanya Sheehan (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2014), 220.

10. Titus, paraphrased in Pasternak, "Intimate Conflicts," 220.

11. Pasternak, "Intimate Conflicts;" Kuhn and McAllister, *Locating Memory*; Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography & Remembrance* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press; Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2004).

12. Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 8-10. Risatti follows philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer in this line of thinking.

13. Martha Langford points out that while family albums commonly employ a chronological ordering system, this is by no means the only approach used. Martha Langford, "Speaking the Album: An Application of the Oral-Photographic Framework," in Kuhn and McAllister, *Locating Memory*, 226.

14. At the same time, we should note that the types McQuarrie focuses on are not births, marriages, and first days of school. Her chosen categories exist within the day-to-day rituals of family life, rather than those of special occasions.

femininity. To understand the roles and impacts of embroidery in different centuries, Parker follows shifting trends in subject matter and style, examining conventions based on the use of patterns and the support or subversion of dominant ideologies.¹⁵ Parker also draws a link between embroidery and domesticity, signalling its role in the construction of social status and the performance of motherly and wifely duties, beginning in the 17th century.¹⁶ Although the role of embroidery in modern households is not as clear-cut, it continues to bear the connotations of femininity and domesticity; the prevalence of embroidery within the context of home and lifestyle blogs is something of a testament to the continued connections between embroidery, femininity, and the home. It is also the weight of these connotations that makes embroidery such a rich tool for feminist artists.¹⁷

McQuarrie's use of repeating geometric forms highlights the conventionalities of the medium, creating a decorative layer of pattern over the photographs. McQuarrie employs a style of embroidery known as blackwork,¹⁸ made up of repeating geometric patterns and often used to create figurative motifs, which can be built upon with shading; she uses existent geometric patterns taken from embroidery books,¹⁹ creating a simple stamping effect. These patterns are expanded into a layer of interlocking and free-floating motifs, which act as a kind of ornate chain-link fence between the viewer and the scenes depicted. The careful matching of the thread with the colours of the image heightens this effect, so that thread and image become interlocked in a way that calls to mind Roland Barthes's contention that photographs are marked by a "referent that adheres."²⁰ For Barthes, photographs belong to "that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape."²¹ The evocation of the windowpane calls to mind the moment of change in focus, often facilitated by the mist of breath, when one's attention is drawn away from the landscape to the pane of glass that mediates our view of it. This same change of focus is at work in the acknowledgement of the materiality of any photograph and the appreciation of its surface texture. The addition of the embroidered 'fence' in McQuarrie's work merely stresses this focus.

Maurizio Anzeri's masks, mentioned above, develop a similar logic, and a comparison between the two projects allows us to grasp the precise nature of McQuarrie's interventions. Anzeri has produced a body of work comprised of studio portraits over the faces of which he has embroidered elaborate geometric shapes. These masks work both as additions, creating intriguing colours and forms, and as subtractions, obscuring the photographic face beneath. Often beginning from a circle around one eye, the shapes spiral out, distorting the natural curves of eye sockets, noses, and cheekbones as they go. *Rita* (2011) has holes for both eyes and also one for the mouth, so that the embroidered intervention disrupts the illusionistic space of the photograph by creating an obstacle between

15. Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: The Women's Press, 1984), 12-13 and *passim*. It is important to Parker that these trends are determined by women's choices, so while social conventions are at work, and historically the majority of embroidered works followed patterns, the embroiderers should not be thought of as lacking in intention, creativity, or agency.

16. Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*.

17. Judy Chicago's seminal work *The Dinner Party* (1974-79) is a perfect example of art that utilises embroidery's ties to concepts of femininity, domesticity, and labour to make a feminist statement about women's roles and how women have attempted to live with and subvert these expectations throughout history. For further examples within, and outside, of art, see Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 189-215.

18. Caroline McQuarrie, email to author, Feb 21, 2019. Blackwork is a form of embroidery that requires the counting of stitches and was traditionally made using black silk thread on to white linen. It was used in the main for clothing and costume accessories. See Victoria and Albert Museum, *Embroidery: A Maker's Guide* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017), 50.

19. Caroline McQuarrie, email to author, Feb 21, 2019.

20. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, translated by Richard Howard (Reading, Berkshire: Vintage, 1993), 6.

21. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 6.

the spectator and the imaged world. Involvement with the image plane becomes multi-faceted as the push and pull between image and thread creates a new and more opaque illusionistic space. There is something of this same push and pull at work in *Swerve*, but to a different degree. The blackwork stitches adhere more closely to the picture frame than *Rita*'s 'mask,' both in the sense that they are flatter and in the decision not to extend the pattern over the depicted bodies. The image beneath is not so obscured that one must mentally remove the blackwork in order to see it; McQuarrie's 'fence' can be either integrated into the image or focused on, in much the same way as taking a photograph through a chain-link fence is a matter of focal point: one can focus on the fence or on the scene behind it. The latter choice renders the fence out-of-focus, but it very much remains a part of the image.

While the geometric patterns used by McQuarrie derive from the conventions of embroidery, the same cannot be said for the stitches that connect and obscure the depicted faces. However, an attempt to read these lines in light of the conventions of family albums may serve as a point of departure. In her introduction to *The Familial Gaze*, Hirsch unpacks the myriad gazes of the family photograph, noting that multiple gazes are at work in any photograph, from the photographer, to the subjects, to the "multiple and contradictory series of looks"²² supplied by various viewers. To this, she argues, the family photograph adds an extra layer of gazes, for in this case "each picture is also the product of other looks and gazes, as family members define themselves in relation to each other in the roles they occupy as mother, father, daughter, son, husband, or lover."²³ In this way, a structure of gazes delineates and enforces the roles of each family member and the web of connections between them. A further exchange of gazes is implicit in the construction of the family album, whereby a narrative is crafted, often by one family member who organises the images—an organisation which may later be contested by these other members.²⁴ In this context, the threads between figures in *Swerve* can be understood as a physical linking of internal gazes, setting forward relationships between the family members depicted. Moreover, the fleshy tone of the connecting thread brings to mind an umbilical cord, making this familial connection not only physical in a material sense, but also bodily in nature. Barthes uses the motif of the umbilical cord to describe the connection between "the body of the photographed thing"²⁵ and his own gaze, suggesting that viewer and subject are linked by a similarly physical relationship. In this way, the connecting threads can be seen as a convention of the family photograph made literal and remediated through thread.

These remarks signal McQuarrie's complex approach to the conventions implicit in the activities of embroidery and family photography. This is important because conventionality has the potential to block an affective response to an artwork. As van Alphen points out, "[m]any images are completely conventionalized

22. Marianne Hirsch, *The Familial Gaze* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), xvi.

23. Hirsch, *The Familial Gaze*, xvi.

24. Hirsch, *The Familial Gaze*, xi.

25. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 81.

or have become part of our habitual visual culture. Those images have usually lost their affective power—if they ever possessed it.”²⁶ Indeed, an over-familiarity with a specific image, or image-type, can reduce its ability to touch the viewer, and this risk creates a fine line between the use of convention for ease of communication and the potential loss of engagement through stagnant conventionality. McQuarrie overcomes this risk by putting conventions from each medium to work; taken out of their usual contexts and put into conversation, they create a new dialogue.

Here it is again useful to compare McQuarrie’s work with Anzeri’s, who like many of the artists mentioned above works on photographs found in places like flea markets. Thus, the base images used by these artists have become untethered from the subjects, photographers, and others who were invested in their creation and maintenance. Baring tragedy, such a divestment relies on the passage of time, a process that corresponds to Martha Langford, who points out that

[i]n oral societies, there is a tendency to slough off memories that have lost their relevance. The past must be viable in the present, for the purpose of storytelling is to keep the community alive.²⁷

In the same way, vernacular portraits and family photographs—rarely appreciated for their aesthetic qualities—are maintained only for as long as their owners can trace a connection with the figures depicted, since it is the link between the present and the past that makes family photographs valuable to their owners.²⁸ When such a link can no longer be established, the repetition and typologies of family photographs make the now irrelevant images little more than conventional, and therefore disposable.

Since time is a factor in the divestment of personal, mnemonic value from vernacular photographs, it is no surprise that the images available to the artists mentioned above generally date from the first half of the 20th century. In contrast, McQuarrie’s photographs are relatively recent, dating from the 1970s and 80s, and for this reason spectators are more likely to own images of themselves and their loved ones comparable to those presented in *Swerve*. The impact of another’s family photographs often relies on the extent to which the depicted family can be related to the viewer’s own. In Barthes’ viewing of James Van der Zee’s *Family Portrait* (1926) it takes him some time to work out what it is about this image that pricks him. Ultimately he identifies the punctum as a necklace that reminds him of a similar piece of jewellery worn by his own aunt.²⁹ This being the case, some spectators are more likely to identify with the images and subjects in *Swerve* than with those utilised by Anzeri and the others. Such an identification has the potential to open the viewer up to an embodied response to the work, although we must consider exactly what form of identification might be operative here.

26. Ernst van Alphen, “Affective Operations of Art and Literature,” *Res - Anthropology and Aesthetics* 53/54 (2008): 28.

27. Langford, “Speaking the Album,” 225-226.

28. Of course, there are exceptions such as museums, archives, and researchers who are interested in exemplars, and vernacular photographs have also been recontextualised into exhibitions and books. I am talking specifically about a move away from private family ownership.

29. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 43-44, 53.

Van Alphen argues for a division between two forms of identification: idiopathic and heteropathic.³⁰ Idiopathic identification involves a reduction of the other to the self through a focus on similarities and a denial of differences. Heteropathic identification, on the other hand, reduces the distance between the self and the other through the sacrifice of the self, who becomes “temporarily and partially”³¹ like the other. Van Alphen is interested in affect as a social phenomenon that arises in an exchange between two bodies (only one of which need be human),³² and he favors a theory of affect as a bodily reaction that arises from such an exchange and triggers critical thought.³³ Van Alphen suggests that heteropathic identification is affectively powerful because it involves a risk to the self and can contain the tension of the self and the other, as the viewer attempts to feel both without denying or necessarily reconciling their differences. In turn, idiopathic identification is less intense because it “reassures one’s own sense of self at the expense of difference.”³⁴ There is much less at stake in an engagement where one reasserts the self and denies the experience of the other.

Due to their relative contemporaneity, the base photographs used in *Swerve* lend themselves to idiopathic identification for viewers who are able to call upon their own comparable family photographs and engage with the type of image, rather than with the specificities of McQuarrie’s childhood depictions. As Barthes suggests, the act of sharing one’s photographs produces a situation of the type ‘I’ll look at yours if you’ll look at mine,’ promoting a form of exchange in which each person is more interested in showing their own photographs than in seeing the other’s.³⁵ It is this very circulation that gives family photographs the power to maintain familial bonds.³⁶ Hirsch notes that “family pictures are often so similar, so much shaped by similar conventions, that they are readily available for identification across the broadest and most radical divides,”³⁷ thereby making a connection between the conventional nature of family photographs and the ease with which viewers can identify with other people’s family archives. Like Van Alphen, Hirsch sees this ease of identification, which exists even across cultures, as potentially dangerous, due in part to the denial of difference.³⁸ However, one may argue that an engagement with McQuarrie’s images is no longer a straightforward over-writing of the other with the self. The puncturing of the photographs with the embroidery needle, and particularly the partially anonymising threads that run from face to face, bring in a risk and a tension which are not normally present in idiopathic identification. By reducing McQuarrie’s images to their own, or the figures of child or parent to themselves, viewers place themselves in harm’s way, succumbing to the puncturing of needle through both face and photo-paper, and potentially experiencing them as personally violent. This is not to suggest that embroidery is an innately violent act; as Parker’s work has amply shown, there is a lineage between embroidery and the construction of femininity, a connection which relies on ideals of innocence, nature, and sedentary activity.³⁹ Rather, it is the subject of the

30. Alphen, “Affective Operations,” 28. Van Alphen cites art historian Kaja Silverman for this division, who in turn bases her work on the theories of German philosopher Max Scheler (Silverman, 1996, 23-24).

31. Alphen, “Affective Operations,” 28.

32. Alphen, “Affective Operations,” 21, 23-24.

33. Van Alphen follows Deleuze’s idea that affects (alternatively referred to as intensities by Deleuze) deal a “shock to thought” leading to new and urgent knowledge, outside of what is accessible through logical cognitive thought processes alone. See Alphen, “Affective Operations,” 21, 23, 30.

34. Alphen, “Affective Operations,” 28.

35. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 5. Barthes is also talking more broadly about the photograph as a stand-in for the person.

36. Gillian Rose, *Doing Family Photography: The Domestic, The Public and The Politics of Sentiment* (Farnham: Taylor and Francis, 2010), chapter 5, no page numbers, EBSCOhost Academic Collection - World Wide.

37. Hirsch, *The Familial Gaze*, xiii.

38. Hirsch, *The Familial Gaze*, xiii.

base photographs that colours the act of embroidery as violent or innocent, a fact which becomes clear if we consider the difference in the effect of the stitches in the landscape sections of McQuarrie's photographs against those that puncture the depicted faces. The former are decorative, the latter destructive.

In his investigation into photographs and memory, Batchen outlines Barthes' conception of memory as a bodily experience, understood as "the immediate, physically embracing experience of involuntary memory (the sort of emotional responses often stirred by smells and sounds)." Batchen elaborates on this notion, defining it as "a kind of memory that pierces the complacency of everyday experience, crossing time to affect us right now, in the present," and concludes that, for Barthes, "memory is not so much image as sensation."⁴⁰ This is then very much an embodied conception of memory, which figures the experience of remembrance as both triggered by bodily senses (specifically aural and olfactory) and as felt in the body, through affect and sensation. Barthes sets this definition of memory in opposition to photography, which he believes replaces this sensorial memory with its image. Batchen also cites cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer, who also contested the popularly held understanding of the relationship between photography and memory. For Kracauer this is a question of clarity: memory is vague, malleable, and ordered by personal significance, whereas photographs are detailed and informative, reliant upon the spatial and temporal conditions of their creation.⁴¹ Batchen studies photographs from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth-century that have been augmented (painted over, printed on fabric, integrated into jewellery, accompanied by hair) to increase their memorial access, examining how these objects and their makers and users attempt to overcome the limitations of photography in remembrance, as set forward by Barthes and Kracauer. According to Batchen, these "hybrid objects"⁴² "turn remembering into a complex interaction in which the natural and the cultural can no longer be distinguished, in which memory is generated as an emotional exchange between an evocative image ensemble and a receptive viewer."⁴³ In this way, memory is enacted through an engagement between the object and the spectator—a description with strong parallels to van Alphen's theory of affect as a social exchange between a viewer, or reader, and an artwork. Going further, Batchen states that "these photographs ask us to surrender something of ourselves, if they are to function satisfactorily. They demand the projection onto their constituent stuff of our own bodies."⁴⁴ This suggests that a bodily engagement is necessary to activate these objects, but also that such an engagement is not necessarily reliant on physical touch. The projection of our own bodies calls to mind theories of empathy, such as have been re-evaluated by art historians Michael Fried and Ellen Esrock, in which an artwork is animated by the viewer's bodily projection into the picture frame.⁴⁵ In Batchen's framework this can

39. Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*.

40. Batchen, *Forget Me Not*, 15.

41. Batchen, *Forget Me Not*, 16.

42. Batchen, *Forget Me Not*, 48, 81.

43. Batchen, *Forget Me Not*, 70.

44. Batchen, *Forget Me Not*, 97.

be achieved through modes of intervention that render the photographic image into a vehicle for such forms of projection.

There are clear connections between the works Batchen is concerned with and McQuarrie's *Swerve*. In both cases we are looking at personal photographs that have been augmented through a material intervention. However, there are also clear differences: Batchen's objects of research were created by laypeople for their own private consumption, and he often notes the lack of full names, indicating that the objects were intended for viewers already acquainted with the subjects. McQuarrie, on the other hand, is an artist. While she is working with her personal archive, the resulting objects are not intended for a private audience; they move beyond the family sphere into the gallery context, where the viewer does not have a memory connection with the specific photographs, even if the focus on visual tropes common to family albums may strengthen the possibility for idiopathic identification. Viewers of *Swerve* could indeed engage in such an identification, overwriting McQuarrie's memories with their own as they recall childhood pets and family outings, and playing through the sensations that these memories trigger. However, the tension generated by the additional, puncturing thread changes the nature of this remembering and brings attention back to McQuarrie's own relationship to these images. What might it mean to stitch into the photographic face of one's own childhood self?

To develop this question, we may consider film theorist Vivian Sobchack's account of what she calls "carnal thoughts." Sobchack describes her physical response to a film, suggesting that it is her body that perceives the images, sometimes before her mind has processed what it is that her eyes are seeing.⁴⁶ For Sobchack, this phenomenon takes place in the space between the figural and the literal. She is concerned with the conjunction *as if*, quoting critics who use it to explain their experience of involvement with particular films. Sobchack argues that this way of using *as if* does not go far enough, since it fails to capture the sense in which the viewing experience is real and concerns the whole body; while it is clear that the film spectator cannot wear an actor's heavy skirts, or eat an onscreen meal, they do feel and taste these things, rather than simply feeling as if they did. This is a dispersed experience that takes place as an exchange between the spectator and the film, where neither the body in the seat nor the figure on the screen is wholly embodied, but rather the body experiences sensations from both planes. Thus, Sobchack can talk about "what [her] fingers knew"⁴⁷ while viewing a particular scene, positing a form of spectatorship that is experienced, first and foremost, in the flesh. This phenomenon gels with affect theory, according to which the physical response to an image is precognitive, felt in the body before it can be processed through thought.⁴⁸ However, embodiment is a positioning of the mind within the body; it is not a matter of perceiving

45. Robert Vischer developed the definition of empathy (*Einfihlung*) in the late nineteenth century, using the phrase "kinesthetic imagination" to articulate how the viewer might move within a painted landscape. He also explored how viewers can identify with a pictured object, using theories related to dreams in support of this assertion. Broadly speaking, these aspects of empathy can be defined as projection and identification, and, as Esrock points out, it is these aspects that have survived in Fried's work as well as in her own. Ellen J. Esrock, "Embodying Art: The Spectator and the Inner Body," *Poetics Today* 31, no.2 (2010), 218-219, 230; Michael Fried, *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2002), 37.

46. Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), especially 53-84.

47. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 53, 84.

with the body alone, but rather of acknowledging the inseparable nature of body and mind; thus, Sobchack argues that “carnal thoughts” are important because they “ground and inform more conscious analysis.”⁴⁹ Likewise, within affect theory, both Bennett and van Alphen highlight the role of affective responses in triggering thought, sparking a more creative kind of critical inquiry than can come out of conventional thinking.⁵⁰ Both theorists are interested in French philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s term the *encountered sign*, which refers to “the sign that is felt, rather than recognized or perceived through cognition.”⁵¹ What is key here is not only that the sign is felt, but rather that the intensity⁵² of the bodily reaction sparks a more critical and more creative line of thinking than a purely cognitive thought process.⁵³ Within such an interaction, the sign is first encountered by the body, and then the experience is unpacked and the sign decoded,⁵⁴ and this is a process that calls for the involvement of both body and mind: it is not enough to feel, and it is not enough to think; according to van Alphen, it is the combination of both that leads to new knowledge.⁵⁵ McQuarrie’s work is rich with connotations and signs, requiring an approach that incorporates these aspects of her work into an embodied reading. Understanding the *encountered sign* allows us to embrace a bodily reaction to the work, and to think critically and creatively to attempt to unpack and understand what elicits such a reaction.

Photographs and embroideries are not only objects, they are the products of action. As both Hirsch and Titus explain, the act of taking (and sharing) photographs is an important part of the ritual of creating and maintaining family connections. So how might we consider the act of embroidery, its repetition, its painstaking attention to detail? In the context of the photographic face, the act of embroidery reads as violence, as a destructive puncturing. However, embroidery in the main is an act of creation, embellishment, and mending. The act of stitching into the figures’ faces does more than disfigure them; it binds them together. Earlier, I discussed the physical linking of gazes; if we turn to consider embroidery as mending, we can then read it as a way of reinforcing these depicted relationships. Taking embroidery’s potential to repair even further, we might consider this mending as analogous to the way in which a surgeon stitches to close a wound.⁵⁶ The care required in the act of embroidery also communicates dedication, although such dedication need not be benevolent: a similar dedication might be employed in the creation of a voodoo doll, whereby the likeness of a person is manipulated or harmed in an attempt to hurt the actual person.⁵⁷ In a more modern context, voodoo dolls have been utilised in psychological studies in order to ascertain the likelihood of a person inflicting actual harm by gauging their propensity for symbolic harming.⁵⁸ Conversely, this act of symbolic harming can be harnessed as a therapeutic retaliation against an abuser.⁵⁹ Beyond voodoo and retribution, embroidery as a creative act has been identified

48. Felicity Callard and Constantina Papoulious, “Affect and Embodiment” in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, edited by Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 247.

49. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 60.

50. Alphen, “Affective Operations,” 23; Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2005), 35-37. Both theorists follow Deleuze’s framework, which acknowledges the power of affective responses to deliver a “shock to thought.”

51. Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 7.

52. Deleuze uses the terms affect and intensity interchangeably (Alphen, “Affective Operations,” 23).

53. Alphen, “Affective Operations,” 23; Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 7, 37-38.

54. Eugenie Brinkema has also emphasized the mind’s role in embodiment, and more specifically, textuality’s role in affect. Her book *The Forms of the Affects* argues against the opposition of affective and signifying approaches in the humanities, stating instead that reading is integral to the understanding of affects and maintaining critical engagement in the context of embodiment. I do not focus on Brinkema in these pages largely because her book is intended to wrest affect theory from the context of spectatorship. Her work reads affects *as* forms, separate from experience, perception, and sensation. Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 36.

55. Van Alphen points out that conventional thinking leads to what is already known, whereas the creative thinking sparked by affect is capable of creating new knowledge (Alphen, “Affective Operations,” 30).

56. Thanks to Helen Westgeest for suggesting this to me.

57. Ceri Houlbrook and Natalie Armitage unpack the misconception that voodoo dolls are related to the Haitian Vodou religion, connecting the practice, instead, with a European tradition. Ceri Houlbrook and Natalie Armitage, *The Materiality of Magic: An Artifactual Investigation into Ritual Practices and Popular Beliefs*, (Oxbow Books, 2015), EBSCOhost Academic Collection - World Wide. Daniel Ogden compiles accounts of the making and usage of voodoo dolls in Greek and Roman history. Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook*, (Cary: Oxford University Press,

as possessing therapeutic qualities.⁶⁰ Such readings do not, and are not intended to, provide insight into the artist's family life, but rather indicate the possible scope of affective resonance. A viewer might variously be touched by a daughter's dedicated maintenance of family bonds, repulsed by an act of abuse, or morbidly fascinated by the possibility of familial conflict; the tension between these readings has the potential to heighten an embodied experience of the work. Just as film theorist Jennifer Barker points out the complexities of a child's dual desire to at once love and care for a toy, but also to take it apart and see how it works,⁶¹ we see a similar duality at play in the reading of *Swerve*: love is at once a constructive and a destructive force. Understanding this duality requires the knowledge of both the body and the brain, as the decoding of signs unpacks a reading which resonates in the body of the viewer.

Temporality plays a key role in a number of the theories of embodiment prevalent in film. Despite the assertions of neuroscientist Alain Berthoz, phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and film theorists such as Barker regarding the embodied nature of all perception, Sobchack argues against the capacity of photography⁶² as a medium to elicit embodied spectatorship, referring precisely to the temporal differences between film and photography. According to Sobchack, film invites a lived, embodied experience as "a 'coming-into-being' (a presence always presently constituting itself)," while photography "functions to fix a " 'being-that-has-been' (a presence in a present that is always past)."⁶³ When viewing a film, the spectator is bound up in an unfolding time, in which they are constantly situated within a present moment with the anticipation (and eventual fulfilment) of a future moment to come. The viewer of a photograph, on the other hand, is faced with a past moment, one that is brought into the present only as an artefact, so that looking at that moment is always a way of looking back. For Sobchack, one of photography's defining attributes is its ability to commodify moments,⁶⁴ arguing that, by capturing the moment, photography creates a "thin, insubstantial"⁶⁵ space which can be held but cannot be inhabited, and therefore leaves no room for embodied spectatorship. While her arguments are compelling, and although she references Barthes directly with regards to the phenomenology of the photographic, and obliquely with her use of the phrase "...that-has been," Sobchack fails to address the concept of the *punctum*—the pricking, bruising affect of a personally poignant feature of a vernacular photograph,⁶⁶ an affect that Barker has described as "unmistakably physical."⁶⁷ This suggests that the *that-has-been* that Sobchack sees as distancing, may very well be part of what elicits an embodied spectatorship of photographs.

Sobchack's situating of photographs as always in the past is complicated by *Swerve*, and by other embroidered photographs, which contain multiple temporalities and therefore take a discussion of time beyond the fraction of a

Incorporated, 2002). EBSCOhost Academic Collection - World Wide.. The materials used in the creation of voodoo dolls varies significantly, from paper or fiber, to clay or bronze (see Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts*, 245). A voodoo doll need not physically represent the person one wishes to harm, the likeness can be entirely projected (see Randy J. McCarthy, et al., "Parents' Spontaneous Evaluations of Children and Symbolic Harmful Behaviors Toward Their Child." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 67 (2017), 424.

58. McCarthy, et al., "Parents' Spontaneous Evaluations."

59. Lindie H. Liang, et al., "Righting a Wrong: Retaliation on a Voodoo Doll Symbolizing an Abusive Supervisor Restores Justice." *The Leadership Quarterly* 29, no.4 (2018): 443-56.

60. Kristin Fontichiaro, "Making as Self-Soothing: The Power of Stitches." *Teacher Librarian* 45, no.5 (2018): 53-54.

61. Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 144.

62. While Sobchack refers to photography generally, her logic is best applied to vernacular photographs, as she does not unpack the often less specific temporalities of fine art photography.

63. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 146.

64. Sobchack discusses photography in the context of Frederic Jameson's connection between realism and market capitalism (Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 141-143).

65. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 146.

66. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*.

67. Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 31.

second of the photographic moment. Understanding how embodied spectatorship functions with these works requires an unpacking of these multiple temporalities. Just as, as Hirsch explains, there are multiple gazes inherent in any photograph, photographs also contain multiple moments. In many photographs this consists merely of the moment in which the photograph was taken and the moment in which it is viewed, as encapsulated by Barthes's umbilical cord linking subject and viewer, which he describes as "radiations" proceeding "[f]rom a real body, which was there," and "which ultimately touch me, who am here".⁶⁸ Thus, the act of viewing a photograph encompasses, in the most simple of cases, the time and space of both subject and viewer, and in the family album we must also consider the intervening moment in which the photographic narrative was created, the construction of which changes a viewer's understanding of the individual images. In *Swerve* there is a further curatorial act: the artist's engagement with and selection from the family album, on top of which we must factor the time spent scanning,⁶⁹ pairing, and re-printing the images, as well as the final time- and labour-intensive act of embroidery.

In Batchen's discussion of photographs that have been painted over, or had their photographic base removed, he claims that "the image that remains look[s] less situated in a specific moment, more ageless, less mortal,"⁷⁰ which entails that the additional work on the image slows it down, adding more time to the original photographic instant. Batchen argues that this slower image requires a slower form of looking, as the detailed surface calls for a more sustained, more engaged form of perception.⁷¹ In embroidery, the trajectory of the thread from point A to point B, and so on, is often called the journey,⁷² a designation that makes an explicit connection between the application of thread and the time inherent in the performance of this act. Batchen describes in his analyses a slow looking in which the spectator, by tracing the detailed surface of the embellished photograph with their eyes, opens themselves up to the intensity of memory held within the objects being perceived. The widening of time through similar embellishments in *Swerve* suggests a comparable opening of intensity.

The temporalities at work in an embroidered image, like those in *Swerve*, are clearly quite different from the temporality of a film, which draws the spectator up into an as-yet-unfolding present.⁷³ Thus, the multiple temporalities I have outlined in *Swerve* point to a series of moments that constitute each of the works. While these photographs have escaped the specificity of the photographic moment, the multiple moments of their construction are still situated in the past. In other words, the change in temporality does not go so far as to achieve the "coming-into-being,"⁷⁴ the ever-unfolding present that Sobchack believes is so integral to the lived, embodied experience of film. Although these objects do not unfold themselves before the viewer, they do encapsulate the process of their construction. Sobchack's "coming-into-being" is literal, since film entails a

68. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 80.

69. Anyone who is familiar with the process of digitising analogue images will recognise the further work required in terms of colour management and fixing dust and scratches. The latter is time-consuming, repetitive, and detailed work, calling to mind the process of embroidery.

70. Batchen, *Forget Me Not*, 25.

71. Batchen, *Forget Me Not*, 25.

72. This is an informal term, likely based on the experiential logic of the trajectory of the needle. One is likely to encounter it in blogs and how-to literature that gives advice on approaches to stitching.

73. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 146.

temporal flow in which each moment is replaced by the next. However, we could speak of a more figurative present inherent in the retracing of the embroidered journey through the act of looking. As Norman Bryson has argued, a line in a drawing “gives you the image together with the whole history of its becoming image,”⁷⁵ meaning that, within a drawing, the use of line allows one to see the construction of the image. Bryson uses this fact to argue that drawing “presents Becoming,”⁷⁶ a sense of the present that is achieved through what we might call—adopting embroidery’s terminology—the journey of the line. Following Bryson’s logic, the journey of the line of embroidered thread allows for a reconstruction of its making which is always situated within the present moment of viewing. In light of this, embroidered photographs are able to encapsulate a present moment which, pace Sobchack, does have the potential to be embodied.

Swerve also reconstructs time. In *Untitled #4 (Picnics)* (Img. 2) the left-hand image depicts two babies and a slightly older child sitting and lying under an umbrella on blankets spread out on a lawn. In the right-hand image, two children and a woman (presumed mother) sit on the ground in front of a car in a rural setting. The repeated appearances of figures (recognisable primarily through hair colour, due to the partial obscurity of their faces), and the vernacular, domestic language of the images, which points back to family albums, lead to the assumption that the babies in one image must be the children in the other.⁷⁷ These disparate times, then, are connected conceptually through the activity of the ‘picnic,’ but also physically through the threads that dip out of one

74. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 146.

75. Norman Bryson, “A Walk for a Walk’s Sake,” in *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act: Selected from the Tate Collection*, edited by Catherine de Zegher (London: Tate Publishing; New York: The Drawing Center, 2003), 150.

76. Bryson, “A Walk for a Walk’s Sake,” 150.



Image 2. Caroline McQuarrie, *Untitled #4 (Picnics)* from the series *Swerve*. 2009, Digital inkjet print on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag paper, embroidery thread. Photo Courtesy of Caroline McQuarrie.



Image 3. Caroline McQuarrie, *Untitled #1 (Activities)* from the series *Swerve*. 2009, Digital inkjet print on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag paper, embroidery thread. Photo Courtesy of Caroline McQuarrie.



Image 4. Caroline McQuarrie, *Untitled #5 (Playground)* from the series *Swerve*. 2009, Digital inkjet print on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag paper, embroidery thread. Photo Courtesy of Caroline McQuarrie.

image and into the other. In viewing the image, the journey of the thread shows the trajectory from one moment to the other. By re-printing onto one piece of photo-paper and stitching into the images as one, McQuarrie demands that they be read as a whole, rather than chronologically, forcing the viewer to engage with the multiple temporalities of the images in the same moment as the slowly stitched time of the needlework.

We may also note that there is something of a parallel between the journey inherent in these embroidered images and the performativity of the family album, which sheds further light on their temporality. Memory and photography theorist Annette Kuhn, building on research by Martha Langford and Richard Chalfen, emphasises the connections between family photography and oral histories.⁷⁸ Langford, whose interest is primarily in the afterlives of family photo albums and how they function once they enter the context of the archive, emphasises the performative nature of the album, and its narrative structure, which, she argues, echoes the oral histories that tend to accompany an engagement with a family album. Kuhn extends this sense of performance and temporality to the reading of a singular image. What Langford has called her “oral-photographic framework” focuses on the study of the features shared by both photo albums and oral histories, including “narrative tropes”/“patterns of [...] types”, repetition, and the interactive and performative nature of the exchange between storyteller or album and spectators.⁷⁹ Earlier I outlined McQuarrie’s use of types and repetition through her selection and pairing of images, but I would now like to focus briefly on the final aspect of performativity. The term ‘journey’ makes clear that embroidery is not a static form, but rather a process which may be traced through the line of the thread.⁸⁰ The underside of the photograph, with its knots and loose ends, is inherent in viewing the front of *Untitled #4 (Picnics)* and works like it. Even without a knowledge of embroidery, the viewer is aware that they are not seeing the whole process, but only the tidy front (in the same way that family photographs depict smiling faces and fun activities, rather than quarrels and chores). Because the action of embroidery is encapsulated in the final embroidered object, the performance of needle and thread adheres to the final work. Analogously, in viewing a family album, a family member would often be present to interpret and elaborate on the photos before them, sharing this interaction with visiting friends and relatives. In *Swerve* this interaction has already taken place, but rather than taking on the form of a dialogue, the exchange is achieved through the action of embroidery: elaborating, interpreting, and ornamenting.

What I have attempted here is a reading of *Swerve* that takes an affective response as its starting point and tries to understand what triggers it. As I have shown, the objects in *Swerve* are physically and conceptually complex. To understand what is

77. Though there is an open question as to who the older child might have been and where they could have gone.

78. Annette Kuhn, “Photography and Cultural Memory: A Methodological Exploration.” *Visual Studies*, 22: No.3 (2007): 285.

79. Langford, “Speaking the Album,” 225-226.

80. The idea of motion is also encapsulated in the title *Swerve*, which implies movement and detour. The title is taken from Giant Sand’s 1990 album by the same name. Caroline McQuarrie, “Swerve,” accessed June 24, 2018, <http://carolinemcquarrie.com/index.php?/projects/swerve/>. This album features four interlude tracks that play on the title: Swerver, Swerving, Swervette, Final Swerve. These each employ a similar sound and might be described as playfully discordant. Swervette features the sounds of children’s voices leading one to imagine a certain synergy that might be achieved by listening to the album while viewing the work.

at work in this series, one must come to grips with the functions of photography and embroidery within the family sphere. Family photography has become a powerful, binding practice that not only records family life but also creates and enforces roles, rituals, and relationships between family members. In McQuarrie's work, the embroidery not only follows craft conventions, utilising pattern and repetition, but also physically re-enforces the invisible conventions of family photography. As viewers, with our own comparable family photographs, we are at once invited to relate and to remember, and at the same time experience the tension in such an exchange, which puts our bodies and our memories in contact with the potentially damaging needle and thread. It is the ambivalence of the act of embroidery, at once constructive and destructive, that is the most difficult to reconcile, making it necessary to consider multiple intentions and meanings in the work. The application of thread mobilises these objects, as they become the products of multiple and varied temporalities. This brings them out of the past through an emphasis on process and performativity that surpasses the photographic moment. *Suerve* is an important work because it rejects a solely phenomenological embodied process of reading for affect, and at the same time cannot be contained within the analytical approach of reading for meaning. Rather, it requires both of these approaches. In reading for affect, we can attempt to come to grips with the affective power of the work and how it moves us. At the same time, reading for meaning allows us to understand the what and why in which the communicative acts of this series are grounded. It is through the combination of meaning *and* affect that each reading becomes valuable.



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